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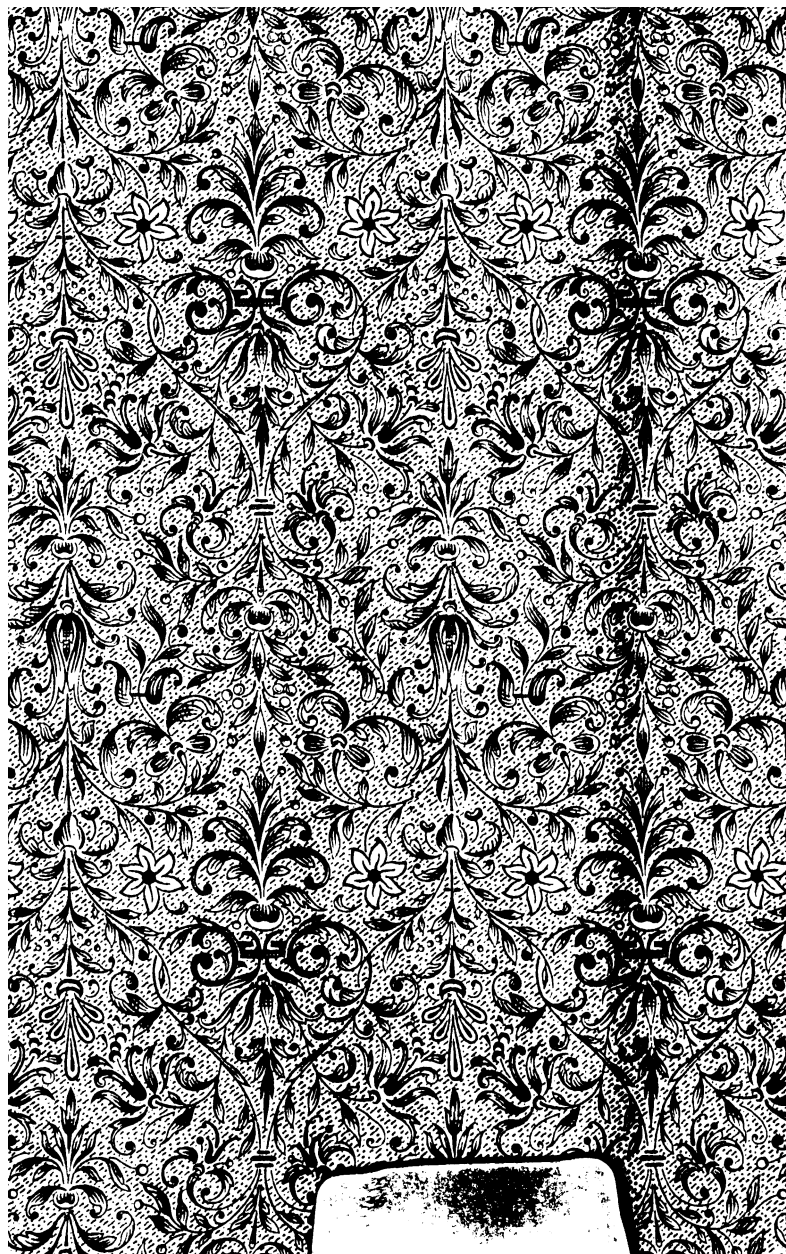
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LEAP YEAR

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BY

M. A. CURTOIS

AUTHOR OF 'MY BEST PUPIL,' AND 'THE STORY OF MEG'

IN TWO VOLUMES

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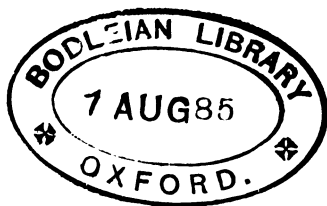
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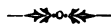
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256. e. 1423



'February has twenty-eight alone.
And all the rest have thirty-one.
But Leap Year, coming once in four,
Gives to February one day more.'

Part First



The First Leap Year

LEAP YEAR



CHAPTER I

ON St Valentine's Day, Leap Year, Minna Franse was waiting in the bonnet division of a large London shop.

It was a rather dark part of the establishment—that portion of it which was devoted to bonnets, and perhaps retained that honour rather on account of traditional merits than of present ones. But in London all must be content with such light as can be had. It was an old shop. You turned a corner to reach this special division,

and went down two steps; then you found yourself amongst the bonnets. It was a long, low room, with long counters down each side, and long, low mirrors beyond each. The bonnets were elevated on wooden stands, and were of all sorts and colours, purple, green, black, fur-trimmed, feather-trimmed, flower-trimmed, ornamented with jet, with gold beads and pins, with erections of ribbon, and with drooping falls of lace. As the lady sat, leaning her head upon her hand, she could look through rows of them and see herself reflected in that attitude, and in that company, in the two feet of glass beyond. It was a curious framework for a face, but a more changeless one than at first sight appeared; for though the bonnets in the dim room, roused by the company, seemed to be staring darkly behind them at the glass, and though the rows of them, even through the gloom, shone, and fell, and quivered, and raised themselves upwards, and drooped back as if to see more clearly, the glass that reflected each and all showed no difference in their expression as they looked.

People came and went, and were reflected for an instant as they passed, Minna sat waiting,

with her face turned towards the glass, and her hand pressed against her cheek. It was a small hand, and the dark face, over which drooped the black feathers of her hat, had also its slender charms, the long fur-trimmed jacket set off the slight figure, and there was a rich depth of colour in the dark red silk beneath. It may be said that all these things in their luxurious beauty matched and blended well. But in the lady's face there was a curious contradiction that could make the second glance at it a longer and more perplexed one than the first. For at first sight it gave the impression of a singularly handsome middle-aged beauty, and it needed a longer look to discover that the face was still young, quite young, of not more than twenty-three years at most, and that the illusion was due to the fact of the features, so care-worn now, being drawn and contracted into an expression that a young face is, happily, but very rarely even able to wear.

Young, beautiful, unworn, unwrinkled, and yet with that look upon it—there was a strangeness in it.

Minna Franse, seated still in the same attitude,

with her face turned towards the bonnets, and her gloved hand pressing hard against her cheek, cared little in those instants for any glances that passers-by cast towards the mirror as they went. And yet she was one who through her life had never shown her feelings willingly before any human eyes at all. Now she sat, careless of their attention, conscious of little but herself, feeling the grip of the gloved fingers against her face, conscious of the image of her loveliness in the glass, of its expression, and of her misery.

There come such moments in our torture when, raging under the pain of it, we become regardless of all that would have moved our pride, and it signifies nothing to us that others should observe the weakness of which we would have given no outward signs before. There come such moments in our trouble when, as day passes day, bringing no release, the 'I will not bear it,' seems to fall into silence, or to become vain and hopeless, like blind hands beating against blind walls in the darkness. There is a strange mingling of the feelings—the degradation and the hunger of despair.

What moved Minna then? Let me tell only

out of it all one fact that shall yet imply the rest. It was Valentine's Day, as we know, but she had received no valentines that morning.

That sounds a joke, but the meaning invoked is less trifling than the fact. Year after year long-suffering postmen had been delayed by the offerings they had the honour of carrying to Miss Franse on Valentine's morning—bouquets, flowers, gloves, fans, cards, pictures—all received always as natural and ordinary events, and expected with due calmness as the annual day came round. Minna knew well the reason why no old admirer would by word or gift approach her now.

Shamed, betrayed, detected, the daughter of an outcast father, the partner in his schemes, the sharer in his disgrace, the talk of her acquaintances, a byword in London—all these things had come. And still, as sitting with her beauty before her she felt all the old strength of her charms ; her heart could only sink into a dull blankness before the sense of a power that had failed.

There come times that strain the powers of endurance even of the good, that force the passionate into the sudden madness of action, that only such suffering can explain. Minna was not

good, but neither was she passionate; a cool, calm head had guided her schemes through life, and even this served to terrify her, as a general may be alarmed at the circumstances closing round him that his old skill has no power to control.

Only that morning with her waking she had told herself that not another day should pass before she had resolved on some action that should decide her life. The day had passed into its afternoon now, and she had not decided yet. What could she do—was there anything that could be done? Or, should she give it all up, and join her father abroad, and renounce the hopes that she had formed?

With a strange timid movement she turned her head. The bonnet department was separated, as we have seen, by two steps and a corner from the rest of the establishment. It was quiet and dark, but above and round the corner, just visible from where she sat, there were noise and movement and the sunshine of a February afternoon upon the place. Near the steps a man who had the appearance of a gentleman's servant had been standing talking to one of the shopmen. She moved her head timidly. Yes—he was there, talking still. It

was that sight that had caused her to fall into her meditation first. She turned her face away, and let her head sink upon her hand again.

Lost! all lost! the golden hopes that had been within her grasp but a few short months before! She might have secured them then. And then as she thought of the honour, the safety, the home that had once been so close, some sudden change of feeling made her lips tremble, and she felt the burning tears within her eyes. Her head sunk lower still, and she shielded her face with her hand.

It was at this moment that the sound of voices close to her came first upon her ears. Two ladies were walking down the shop towards the door and as they went they spoke.

‘You never know anything about dates. I do not suppose you could tell the day of the month or the year if you were asked.’

‘I know rather more than you think I do, with your permission, if you please. Let me suppose that you have asked me now. Leap year—St Valentine’s.’

They went down the room towards the steps; they turned the corner and were gone.

Leap year—St Valentine's! Minna raised her face. A sudden light had darted into her eyes, a sudden movement in her lips, the weariness of despair that had softened them was gone.

She had the quickness that can seize an unexpected idea and the courage that can execute it. As she sat now with her face still leaning on her hand, but turned as if to look down the room, her eyes seemed to be grasping at some thought that she had seen; and her breath came panting between half-opened lips. If she had only strength enough for this—

If she dared—if she could only dare to do it; and if this day that had begun in such wretchedness were to end by securing more than she had ever dared to hope. If she failed—bah! what harm would it do if she did. No one but one would know. For his own sake even he would not reveal the fact. A little hurt pride that she could easily conceal—she need fear no more than that.

Yes, he was still standing there, still talking, only she must be quick. And indeed her growing excitement would not have allowed her to delay.

She took out of her pocket a note she had

received that morning from her dressmaker, and tore off its blank page; she took out her little gilt pencil, and prepared to write. Then for one instant she hesitated, but for one instant only, for the words almost passed her lips in her excitement; 'I will do it.'

She leant her arm upon the counter. It was a little delicate brown wrist that was resting on the paper, and as she was about to begin there came over her a curious sensation as if it were being held so that she could not move it. A strange, almost a superstitious feeling, but it passed in an instant, for she moved it with an effort and began. The words came quickly now, and she had no need to stay to consider as she wrote.

'I am more miserable than an orphan, for my father has deserted me. In all the world I have no hope or friend if I have not both in you. You may perhaps remember the promise you made to me last June. I appeal to it now.'

Yes, he was there still. She folded the note, she took some wafers out of a silk bag in her pocket, and secured it with them. Then she looked up towards the end of the shop. At some distance

a young woman was standing, neatly dressed in black. She bent towards her, and called :

‘Lucy.’

Minna had a voice that could be penetrating ; her call was very soft, but it reached the ears for which it was intended. The young woman in black came towards her at once, and standing by her waited for more.

‘Lucy, do you see that man talking there ?’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘Do you know him ?’

‘It is one of Lord Farnim’s grooms, miss.’

‘Yes. I wish you to go to him, to give him this note for his master, and to tell him to bring me an answer back at once. I shall wait here for it. Do you understand ?’

Lucy gave in reply a scarcely perceptible nod of intelligence, and took the letter in her fingers. She was turning away when Minna stopped her again, more languidly now.

‘Perhaps you may as well give him this at once,’ she whispered slowly. She was leaning her face lazily upon her hand all the while she spoke, but in the left hand, which she moved slightly, was the gleam of gold.

Lucy took it without a word, gave that slight movement of her head and went; her mistress, with her head upon her hand, watched the black dressed figure languidly as it went slowly down the room. Her attitude now was as her manner had been, only that whilst she spoke an inward agitation had prevented her from being able to keep a certain glow of colour and light from out of her cheeks and from her eyes.

There were no passers-by now to see her. Lucy went slowly down the room. At the other end a shopman was arranging bonnets. And if there had been observers they would only have noticed the leaning face for the delicate curves of its loveliness, or for the long lashes that drooped as in fatigue on the brown complexion of the cheeks. Beneath those drooping eyelashes, however, was held a watching glance, and Minna had no need to raise her face to see. So sitting, as in a dream, she watched the black dressed figure down the room, and up the steps, saw it stand apart for a few instants with a companion it had drawn by a word or two aside, and saw his face as with a little movement of the head he turned away. Then the black

neat figure turned itself also and came slowly up the room once more.

Minna did not change her attitude, though she knew that her companion was standing again near her, and did not raise her eyes to greet her as she spoke.

‘What did he say to you?’

‘Nothing, miss.’

Minna had known that already, but she had wished to see whether an untruth would be given.

‘Yes; you may go away now and leave me alone, and find my cousins and tell them not to come back here for me.’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘And if you want anything to-night, you will tell them nothing more than that.’

‘No, miss.’

Lucy went, and Minna found herself again alone, sitting upright now, looking down the shop, and very quiet. The time of waiting must be passed.

Afterwards she remembered it as if it had been a dream—the dark bonnet department, the two steps and the corner at the end, the February sunshine upon the shop beyond. Footsteps came

and went there, voices talked in the distance, a dressmaker came in and spoke to the woman who was arranging bonnets by the counter. Then the dressmaker went, and the woman went on arranging bonnets as before. It was a dream delirious in its quietness, and all the while she kept on telling herself that it meant nothing—it would come to nothing, as she knew. And still the footsteps and voices came and went beyond.

Then the distant sunlight grew more dim, the bonnet department more dark. The February afternoon was passing into shadows now. And then, after an interval, lights shone out in the shop and then in the room by her. It was very quiet, and she could speak to herself no longer. And still the distant footsteps came and went. And then all at once a man came down the steps and up the room to her.

It was the young groom she had seen before. He did not look directly at her as he came, nor she at him. When he reached her he stopped, touched his hat, put a note into her hand, and turned away at once. With the letter lying in her lap, she watched him go down the room and mount the steps. Then she saw him turn to

look stealthily at her. In another instant he was gone.

Then she laid her hand upon the letter as it lay, but she did not open it at once. A dread that she had not expected began to beat within her heart, a fear of the words that another moment might make plain to her. Of her own accord she had placed herself in this position, and yet she feared the consequences now, and shrank from the thought of insulting words as a woman shrinks from the uplifted hand that means a blow.

This might mean so much. But anything was better than the suspense. She opened the letter and read :

‘You may tell your uncle that I will call on him to-morrow. I will keep my word to you.’

She was saved !

Minna read the letter once, twice again, put it carefully in her pocket, and sat looking towards the glass, with her hand against her forehead. Then she got up and walked a few steps, and then sat down again. Her manner was that of one who is stunned. And yet all the while she was telling herself that she had gained all, every-

thing, fame, honour, fortune, she had won her victory at once. In vain! feelings that she had never imagined, that she could not even understand, rose and surged within her breast, and as she sat down, a sudden burst of tears, such as she had never shed in all her life before, hid even her beauty from her eyes.

‘A few months ago he would not have answered me like this.’

It was only a moment of emotion, it passed even as it came, and she became composed again. What inconceivable folly was this? She had gained all that she had wanted, more than she had hoped, she had his word, written too; the great triumph was won, and the rest would come if she had skill.

Rising with a composed face, she arranged her hat before the glass, walked slowly down the rooms of the shop, and went out into the lights and darkness of the streets. She had gained all she wanted and need think no more to-day.

In the same quiet manner she reached her uncle’s house, and had dinner with the rest. As quietly she told them of the visitor they might expect the next day, and resisting all questions

or comments, went to her own room that she might be alone and rest.

A few days later it began to be whispered in London that Lord Farnim was engaged.

CHAPTER II

4. THAT we may understand in some degree the awe and astonishment that pervaded the feelings and faces of the whisperers, it will be well to go back a little, and relate the story that previous months had told.

A few years before there had come as tenant to a certain house in a London square, a gentleman of the name of Franse. He was a stranger to the society of the metropolis, but he seemed to be possessed of more than comfortable means; the square that he had chosen to inhabit, though

not too expensively fashionable, was not too far out of the way of fashion or of wealth, and he soon proved himself a master of that power of giving entertainments that can command the interest of both. His manners were well-bred, his wine of the best, he knew what guests to select; before his first year in London was over he had established a position for himself.

All this while, however, there was not one, even of those with whom he was most intimate, who knew with any certainty what his previous history had been. He was supposed to be a foreigner, and there were stories that he had been known in the South of England by the title of Herr Franse, though if that were the case he had certainly dropped that prefix to his name, and its double syllabled pronunciation too. The slight mystery only added a more piquant interest to his acquaintances. He was tall and slender, between forty and fifty, not peculiarly foreign, or peculiarly English in appearance, he was rather bald, with delicate features, an expressive smile, and brown sleepy eyes, he had a slight foreign accent, a perfect self-command, the dress of a coxcomb and the ease of a man of the world. To all these things, accom-

panied as they were by expensive entertainments society saw no reason to object.

Gradually, as time went on and Mr Franse became more intimate with his various acquaintances, he became more communicative about himself. His father had inherited an estate in America from a distant relation, so he said, and he had himself been brought up for the most part in that country, though on the death of his wife he had parted with the land, wishing to settle with his beautiful daughter in some European home. For some years they had been living in France or Germany, that her education might be completed in those countries, now he wished to give her all the advantages of the metropolis, before purchasing some estate in the country to which they might retire at last. All this seemed simple and natural enough, the easy charm of Mr Franse's manner was in perfect harmony with his story, and the beauty of the brown quiet Miss Franse who kept always in silent shyness by her father's side, no lady even found herself able to dispute. In short the pair were received, and there was no more need for any questions to be asked.

Nevertheless, as months still passed on, there

began to rise about them, not questions, but rumours of a mysterious and questionable description. It was whispered that the agreeable Mr Franse, who was so pleasant always in his manner, did not now confine himself entirely to those select and splendid entertainments to which he still went and which he gave. Young bachelors of all sorts and ranks were said to haunt his house; there were hints of races at which he was to be seen with his lovely daughter by his side, and of nightly dinner-parties to which no ladies were invited. People shook their heads and whispered that it was a pity that the poor girl had no mother or sister of her own—and so shaking out their disapproval continued to go to the Musical Afternoons at which the best opera singers sang, and to dances and dinners that were too pleasant to be foregone for scruples. If Mr Franse was an enthusiast for card playing and for other amusements, as was supposed, and if he lost his money over these that was surely no concern of theirs. So the time passed on. To Noel Franse himself the game was at its height, and so skilfully managed that no one even suspected that the pleasures of which they knew in part

might turn out to be the only and supporting business of his life.

The game went on steadily and well, and there seemed no reason why for years it should not continue as before. Then all at once there came into the midst of it an unexpected revelation—one of those sudden circumstances that, falling on our ordinary life like flashes of fire in the night-time, cause it to be at once lit and intensified with the lurid glow and deep shadows of a tragedy.

This was the event, briefly related here, though the newspapers all treated it at length. At some little distance from the square in which Mr Franse resided lived a widowed lady, the cousin of an earl, with her two daughters and her one only son. On this young man, just twenty-three, handsome, careless, idle, entering upon life, and the possible heir of a title, the hopes of all the family were fixed—he was the darling of his mother and she denied nothing that she could give or spare to him. For the last two years since he had left college, he had resided in London with her. One evening he left his family after dining with them as usual, and did not return that night.



That circumstance created no alarm, but early the next morning a hasty messenger arrived with a face of alarm and horror, and summoned them all from their beds. He had come from the house of Mr Franse—with whom Mrs Montro had no acquaintance—and entreated the butler to break as gently as possible to the mother that her son had spent the last night at Mr Franse's house, that he had played cards with other guests there, and had lost money, though to no considerable extent, and that in the early morning he had gone into one of the sitting-rooms as if to put on his overcoat for departure, and had there shot himself.

It is not necessary to relate in detail what even the newspapers did not much describe—the misery and agony of the family to whom this news had come. For the most part that was silent, still as the body of the young man lying in the gray morning in Mr Franse's house. But the tidings spread far and wide before the day was done, and roused a tumult of feelings that had no desire or necessity for restraint. Young Montro had been well-known, and well-connected, a general favourite, the possible heir to an earldom,

and a familiar presence in many places where he went. Now he lay dead, cut off in his youth, surrounded by mystery. And the gloom of that mystery touched too that other household from which first the news had come. People began to ask themselves: Who then after all were these Franses? What was the meaning of these nightly entertainments, and how came it to pass that one of them should lead at last to this?

Rumours went and came, gossippers and reporters made capital of the event; friends bent in wretchedness over the silent face from which could come no answer to any questions now. Such pale silence has a power that is scarcely to be described. There is unbearable madness in the thought of vague suspicion that may have passed into the uncertainty that is beyond the hope or reach of proof.

Noel Franse, thus brought against his will into a hateful prominence, had the good sense to court enquiry in every possible direction, to throw open his house to visitors, to submit himself to the agents of newspapers, and to speak of the event with an openness that was only kept in check by the sorrowful gravity apparent in

his manner and his face. Nevertheless, though he appeared thus in all honesty to wish to turn the light upon his actions, the complete illumination that followed could scarcely have been desired by him.

And the cause of those explanations then? That remained below the surface, as many causes do, though doubtless it was due to the action of an agent that serves to bring about the greater part of the events within the world. For the burning zeal of friends and relations requires its coin, and occasionally its crooked ways as well. But whatever the cause may have been, the result was made audible to all.

And that result? It had the outward form of a gentleman of about forty, bald, fat, well-dressed, smooth-skinned, with a habit of fingering his watch-chain, and an engaging simplicity both in demeanour and in voice—a witness of witnesses for an inquest, for he was entirely open in his communications, and seemed only too much inclined for speech. The audience was breathless whilst it heard.

Did he know Mr Montro? Oh, yes, he knew him perfectly well, had seen him often whilst he

lived in Mr Franse's house. He had been now with Mr Franse for some years—a secretary, steward, he did not quite know what to call himself—and had done a deal of work for him; had known him first in Germany. He was hard-up indeed then for want of cash. But Mr Montro had paid him a lot of money since he had been in London, though there were others out of whom he had got even more than that.

And then followed communications of a nature to startle society, though representing in truth a career that is often repeated in its midst. For Mr Pollen—that was the gentleman's name—seemed to find himself under no sort of bonds of reticence in any matter in which his late master was concerned. He had known him first some years before, he said, when he was suffering from the effects of a speculation that had consumed his means. Though, indeed, he would have had none to lose if it hadn't been for another spec that had turned out better the autumn before that.

He was then penniless, and it appeared to be understood that Mr Pollen was at that time in much the same sort of condition too. The two

fellow-adventurers had joined company, and had come together to London. Here Noel Franse by his clever devices 'and his ways' had secured for himself a footing in society, whilst he provided for his livelihood by establishing in his house with skill and secrecy a sort of gambling salon, to which his beautiful daughter acted as a convenient decoy. 'And he has made more than thousands out of it, that indeed he has.' With regard to the cards themselves Mr Pollen had somewhat less to say, being, perhaps, unwilling to make too many disclosures with reference to games in which he himself had played.

Mr Montro had come there often lately, not so much at first. He was mad on Miss Franse, that was the only reason why he came. Once her father had made her write him a letter when he hadn't been there a while. Miss Franse was not always in the room with them, though she had sometimes played cards with them all night. There were some that wouldn't stay unless she was there, that was the reason why she did.

'Was Mr Montro engaged to Miss Franse?'

'Oh, no, not more than any of the rest of them. They most of them fancied themselves engaged to

her. She knew how to deal with 'em quite well.'
(Laughter.)

'Had he ever been engaged to her himself?'

'He had got pretty near it once, he thought; that was in Germany when they were together there. They were all hard up then.' (Much laughter.)

He had no cause of complaint against Mr Franse —this was said with some quickness as if to prevent ulterior ends being guessed. He left Mr Franse on the day Mr Montro died, but that had all been arranged by them before. He did not like the ways of Mr Franse, and never did. Did not approve of them, in fact. But Mr Franse had always paid him all he owed.

With regard to other matters he seemed to have less to say, and did not add much to previous information. Mr Montro had come earlier than usual on that last evening. He had lost money that night, but not very much, about two hundred pounds. He had lost more than that before. It was his own revolver that he shot himself with. No one, as far as he knew, was present at the time. Miss Franse had been away all that night. Mr Montro had only seen her for a few

minutes before she left. They had only spoken a word or two together, and that in presence of the rest. He seemed rather strange when he heard that she was going. Mr Pollen had not observed any other difference in him that night, except that he was pale. And as he seemed to have nothing more to tell, his evidence was here permitted to conclude.

Minna Franse was spared the pain and humiliation of appearing publicly after the disclosures that had been made, but her father was called as the next witness, and subjected to a searching cross-examination, to which he submitted with equal patience and skill. Cool, self-possessed, gentlemanly, quiet in manner, and refined in voice and dress, he formed as great a contrast as could be desired, to the secretary he had so lately owned. His answers were cold and clear, never containing more words than was necessary to make their sense distinct; he laid some stress on the fact that 'the poor boy' must have brought 'his own revolver' to the place; admitted that he had been in the habit of gambling, with a slight intimation that many other gentlemen in London could say the same; spoke slightly of

private means, and complained with quiet scorn that the evidence of a servant with whom he had parted, should be received against his daughter and himself. There was not much to be gained from him, and after some while he was permitted to retire.

At this stage of the proceedings an entirely new turn was given to them by the handing in of a bundle of papers that had just been discovered, slipped down between a chest of drawers and the wall in Mr Montro's room. The first of these was a letter by the young man himself, with the date of the evening before his death. It was short, hastily written, and full of passionate remorse, declaring that he could not bear the thought of the disclosures that must be inevitable at last, that with the fairest prospects, he had chosen to ruin himself, and that on himself only lay all the blame of his death. The papers and accounts attached to this communication afforded only too ample evidence of its truth, and the somewhat reluctant evidence of a money-lender, who was now compelled to appear, served as further confirmation of some of the statements they contained. The dealings of the unfortunate

young man with the Franses, though these related to considerable sums, had been after all but drops in the ocean of his difficulties—and the final end seemed to have had but little reference to them, though some desperate idea of retrieving his position, or of seeing again one whom he appeared really to have loved, had induced him to spend the night before the catastrophe within their house at last. With the reading of these papers, and the evidence of the money-lender, and of a physician who described the deceased as possessed lately by a brooding and morbid disposition, concluded the evidence that could be gained.

The inquest had lasted the greater part of the day, and the twilight had fallen on all, and had then been lighted before the jury could retire at length. After a very short interval they returned. Before, however, their verdict of 'suicide' and of a 'disordered mind' could be expressed, Noel Franse had escaped from the place, and was already on his way from the city and the land where he had lived.

The game was over and he knew it; and the acuteness that had supported him so long served

only to give him a deeper insight into his ruin. It mattered little, as he knew, that his own share in this final tragedy had not indeed been great, the blame of it would none the less be laid on him; he had been openly denounced as an unprincipled adventurer, living on the young men whom he enticed to their destruction; he had no means of proving the previous statements he had made, the wrath of the virtue of the English nation—which is as overwhelming as it is rare—would be turned upon him now. In any case his position in society was gone, by various actions he had brought himself within the compass of the law, and now that his own secretary had turned against him, the worst of consequences might be feared. And all this on account of an event that he had not expected, and that might easily have occurred within other doors than his own!

The winter darkness had fallen on the lighted streets as Noel Franse escaped. This last action was to add yet another sin to previous guilt in the eyes of others who saw his young, lovely daughter left by it unprotected on the world. But it may have been more subtly calculated

than they supposed. Minna and her father had been accustomed to a complete understanding, she had no wish for a renewal of her life with him abroad, and, under any circumstances, it was as well for her not to seem too much united with him just then. The power of quiet resolve and prompt, cool action, was a common quality to both.

Left alone now without the able assistance that had been always by her side, though probably she found it possible to maintain still some communication with her father, she was not long in coming to some decisions too. A few months would make her able to understand her own position. She would wait in town till then.

Meanwhile, and leaving her father's house to the creditors who came down upon it now, she accepted the shelter offered her by a friend, whom she had been accustomed to call her uncle, and who had, in truth, an old acquaintance both with Noel Franse and with his schemes. It was owing, however, entirely to her own skill that she was received now into this family, kindly disposed to her as it had been—the vague, golden hopes that

she held out to them excited the ambition that will do more than friendliness sometimes. Her beauty at least was undeniable, and she might well be supposed to have admirers still. Minna partly believed in that herself, and during the hours in which she sat alone in the room given up to her, in the solitude of mourning and desolation that she affected, she wove her visions for her life.

Perhaps it may be thought that less pleasant feelings should have occupied her mind and fancy then—the smart of shame, of detection, the loneliness that had now no father's care, the consciousness of errors and of wrong, and above and beyond these things, the horror of the event that had cast out into the darkness of eternity a young soul that had loved her. No doubt these things did in some degree press their weight upon her heart, for she was but human after all ; and still in lonely hours if she waked in the night she could hear again the crack of the pistol that had startled her in the early morning as she sat, returned from the party, with her dark hair loose upon her shoulders, and her eyes smiling at the beautiful reflection in the glass before her eyes. That succeeding day, the crowd

of inquirers at the house, the one room into which she could not go, her father's absorbed face—these things, so lately happened, remained forgotten yet. Nevertheless, it was with the plans and the future of herself and her father that her mind was occupied still, and recent horrors had not touched her with any influence strong enough to disturb her reflections as she thought.

Oh! it is in vain that we imagine that actions need have no abiding influence upon souls, that we soothe ourselves with the generosity of thieves, and exercise ourselves upon the heroism of highwaymen. Such things do exist sometimes, indeed, because from above there come the diviner impulses that will not allow any of us to stifle ourselves utterly beneath our sins; but yet in spite of them—in spite of interesting villains and sentimental swindlers—it is just as suitable to expect to see unbent the shoulders of a man who has borne a crushing weight through years of toil, to see the features of the poor smooth as if they had known no care, the faces in a dungeon healthy as if the fresh air were breathing on their lips, as it is to hope that the hearts of the rebel and the schemer will not be in themselves rebellious and

sordid, too, fierce with the ungoverned impulses that have known no restraining power, petty with the narrow hopes that no higher objects or desires have reached. Pent in cunning devices, narrowed to selfish cares—there are such souls on earth.

And it is useless hoping—as we all hope sometimes—that a great event will have in itself the power to make us different to ourselves, it is not in that easy manner that we can meet the crises of our lives. Death, sudden temptation, a sudden opportunity, are not in themselves instructors, they find us what our lives have made us, and our characters will not contradict themselves for us.

Once more—there rises in the hearts of some of us a certain feeling of contempt for the lessons to which our earlier years have been subjected—the catechisms and the formulas out of which our wiser lives have grown. Nevertheless, whatever we may think, it is undeniable that these things have their influence, and that such influence remains—the barrier that we insist on passing must still be a barrier to us. Minna had not been educated to have scruples.

And now once more we can imagine her as she was in those days—alone in her room of

mourning, sitting before the glass, a favourite attitude with her, with her brown delicate fingers clasped beneath her face, her dark eyes shining and absorbed in thought beneath the dark lovely curves of eyebrows above. Need we wonder she could think that in spite of all that had come and gone she must have admirers still.

But day succeeded day, and no admirers came again to her.

Day succeeded day, and passed into weeks and into months, and no admirers came. No old acquaintances would recognise her, no visitors came near her, ladies looked the other way, men she had known gave her but a careless recognition as they passed her in the streets. And still as week succeeded week these things began to cut more deeply into her heart and life than she could have imagined possible before. Minna had not perhaps much of a woman's modesty, but she had a woman's pride—the two feelings touch curiously, though they are distinct—and any slight or scorn affected her with an almost physical sensation, like a stinging touch upon the brown softness of the cheek that

had too much self-control to flush. And these things happened, and month passed into month and she began to feel desperate at last.

Nevertheless, that feeling itself had no power to rouse her to desperate action—as some people count desperation. Her nature possessed always too much restraining power for that. She was too clear-sighted for delusion, the passionate attractiveness of wrong-doing found no sort of sympathy in her. Through all her life she had intended to find some settled prospects for herself, the years of amusement that she had allowed herself were to end at last in that. Nor had she ever doubted her power to ensure such results at length. The time had now come for that power to be exercised. Her old loveliness and charms remained to her. *It must be that something could be done.*

And so it came to pass that worn-out, despairing, driven to bay like an animal that turns at last, she took the one step that was indeed to decide her life. We know the words in which her appeal was made and answered. But for such words to have been possible from either side, there must have been explaining circumstances before.



We will learn those circumstances as briefly as we can.

Two years before when Minna was attending some races with her friends she met there a young Lord Farnim, the owner of some estates in the east of England, a good judge of horses and of land, rich, well conducted, well looking, and still quite young, being only a few years older than herself. During the years that followed she maintained with this young nobleman a kind of fitful intercourse, meeting him now and then at the house of the friend through whose means they had first met, and holding with him just enough communication for him to be able to know when she might be expected there. In himself personally he had not perhaps so many attractions as she had been accustomed to expect, he was grave and sober in manner, and not too quick in speech, but she knew that he was considered by anxious mothers an impregnable fortress, and she was pleased with her dominion over him. On his part, he had been seized with that madness of first love that has only the greater power when the earliest years have passed, he allowed her to have complete mastery

over him, and before the first week of their first acquaintance was over made it evident that he needed only her encouragement to be ready to marry her.

It may be asked why Minna, knowing her father's position and her own, did not bestow that encouragement at once, and probably if Mr Franse had been with her she would have been speedily compelled into an engagement. But it must be remembered that she was at that time very young, barely twenty-one, fond of pleasure and admiration, satisfied with the life she led, and ready to delay any changes for a while. The intensity of this new admirer's love was almost alarming to her, his quiet soberness in other respects was not in accordance with her tastes, and she had found herself besides able to attract in some degree others of even higher rank than his. It followed that whilst she would by no means let go of his affection, making tighter her hold over it whenever she feared that it might escape her, she restrained its eagerness with care, and by anxious skill was able to ward off for a long while the proposal that she feared.

The time however did come when her efforts

were no longer rewarded with success. A year and a half of hunger demands to be satisfied at last.

Minna still remembered with something like a nervous thrill, the scene that followed,—the little drawing-room with roses looking in at the window, left solitary that afternoon for her—the tall young man in dark gray by her side, looking down on her with a quiet modest manner and a longing like madness in his eyes. She was terrified, and her terror gave to her manner a new appealing sweetness that she had never been able to produce in it before, and that she could hear even in the more trembling tones of the voice that had always been low and soft when it spoke to him. For, always veiling her nature, she had been shy and quiet with him. She wanted to wait a little—only a little—it was a fancy—he did not know really how little he cared for her—if he would wait a year, he would know his own mind then. She spoke, and he listened, clasping nervously a pocket knife that had lain on the table by which he stood; at the last words with a sudden passionate movement he grasped with his fingers the open blade. The sudden sharpness roused him, and he

let it fall to the ground, then moved by another idea he bent over the table that was near him, whilst she leant back in her chair, her heart beating too fast for her to speak. In another instant, as it seemed, he was before her again, at her feet, and in her hand was the declaration, written in his blood, which told that he would wait a year or any length of time she willed, but that at any time in all her life, or under any circumstances, she had only to say a word and he would be ready to marry her at once.

Minna never knew why the sight of that strange writing recalled her self-command. She read it through, looked at him with a sweet reassuring smile, and then tore it into small pieces as she sat. Then, bending towards him, she took both his hands between her fingers, and whispered in faltering tones—that he was so good to her, she would remember his promise, in another year then they would meet again. And then, allowing her voice to tremble still more, she pitied the wounded hand that had been hurt for her. He bent his head by way of answer, for he was too much moved to speak, drew away his hands silently, rose and left the room. When she saw him again there

were others present, and he was quite composed. The next day she left.

That then was the promise, made on that summer afternoon, whilst the air that came in at the window was soft with the breath of roses and of June. Seven short months only had passed; had the June roses indeed withered into dust and fragments now?

Minna had destroyed the one paper that might have been of use to her. Nevertheless, the promise remained as binding still. It is in our nature to think nothing secure that has not its documents as proof, but there are, notwithstanding, a few of us—one or two, perhaps, out of a hundred—on whom the unwritten word that they have once given will still retain its power. She had the acuteness to know that such a thing is possible sometimes. And out of all the men on earth she believed in this man the most.

Why did she tremble then, with a fear less outwardly expressed but more abiding than she had felt on that June afternoon whilst the summer sunlight shone? Perhaps because she dreaded the effect of the revelations that the last few months had made, Perhaps because the fact of

this step that she had taken was in itself a danger to her power, perhaps because the very trust she felt bore witness to qualities that her skill might not be able to control. In these first moments of her triumph there did come haunting doubts to tell her she might have been safer if she had won no triumph at all.

Only—ah, bah!—what was the good of that? she had gained the first step at any rate, new combinations were before her, she would go on to the end.

She did go on to the end. The engagement was short, swift, secret, and on the twenty-ninth of February—surely the fittest morning in the year for such a ceremony—came the wedding day.

CHAPTER III

AND now, before we take a farewell glance at Minna in her bridal white, let us think once more of the causes that rendered that wedding raiment a possibility to her. To gossips in London, in spite of their awe-struck whispers, the affair seemed easily explained, but the nearer view is sometimes the more confusing after all.

Indeed the surface of that which had happened can be related in a few words. Lord Farnim had made his promised visit on the afternoon he named, had expressed his proposal formally to Minna's

(so-called) uncle, and had added to it a wish that the wedding might take place as soon and with as much quietness as possible. Minna's uncle—I allow him by courtesy that doubtful title—did not consider himself in a position secure enough to make difficulties of any sort, though at the same time some real sense of guardianship induced him to exact as his only condition that he should himself be present at the marriage, to which wish his visitor immediately agreed. Then he went to fetch his niece, and left her alone with her lover, his own girls watching meanwhile from their window above, and gratified at last by a sight of Lord Farnim's back as he walked away.

It must be owned that their thoughts that evening were much excited by even that short glimpse of a peer, and not untinged by a certain sharpness that had not afflicted them before. To think that Minna should be going to marry a lord! Why, a lord had never even visited their house, and now there was one who was actually in love with her. What could he see in her, how did she manage to bring these things to pass? There seemed an unfairness in it. For they

were both handsome girls in their way, and besides no one could tell stories about *them*.

Perhaps if they had possessed a brother, or if their father had not been something more than indifferent to the daughter of his friend—though for that friend he really cared—they might have been able to gain more knowledge about Minna's influence with men. As it was they resigned themselves to a careful inspection of the pair.

'I don't know that it's altogether such a nice thing after all to marry a nobleman,' said Aggie, who was the older and wiser of the two. 'He seems very quiet and strange always, and Minna is odd. I don't think I make them out at all.'

Minna was not insensible to this scrutiny, and would probably have given a good deal [to have been freed from it, but she had no means of preventing it. For the first two days, indeed, she was allowed to be alone with her betrothed, but on the occasion of his third visit Agnes and Ennie came into the drawing-room after a while, and remained there, taking mental observations, until the visitor had said his quiet farewell to all alike and was gone.

'I suppose Lord Farnim kisses you when you are alone, Minna,' said Ennie then.

Minna had her head turned away at the moment, but when she moved again her face showed a pretty confusion that gave a sufficient answer to the remark. For indeed she had possessed enough quickness to turn into that shy blush a flush that had risen on her cheek from a very different cause. Never had she felt more furiously angry with her lover than at that moment, and at the same time never more determined to exact from him to the uttermost his fulfilment of the bond that they had made. Meanwhile she was not without the skill that can meet a present difficulty at once.

The next time Lord Farnim came, she took occasion to call the two girls into the drawing-room, that they might look at some engravings he had brought. Then, when the moment for leave-taking came, she contrived that he should be between her and the rest, and as he took her hand she raised a little towards him with a shy movement the small delicious beauty of her face. It was but the slightest motion, but it answered its effect, for he stooped and kissed her. She

felt him tremble as he did so. Then he let go her hand and went; and she went up to her own room and cried.

Those tears were rather perhaps the result of the overstrained feeling of that week than of any definiteness of alarm for the future that was so close before her then. She did not fear; why should she? she would manage it so that it should all come right at last. Nevertheless, as the days passed on, there began to grow round her heart a chillness that at times seemed to beset her with a very helplessness of dread. In those days again she would sit for hours before her glass, with her small brown fingers clasped beneath her face, not now absorbed in thought, but conscious of the loveliness that seemed like a reassuring presence close to her. In that time of waning hopes there could be strength in the full presence of the charms that knew no waning yet.

Hers was a luxurious beauty, but it had in it no largeness of luxury, but rather the subtle charms of tints as so ftes they were dark, of delicate outlines, of fine small lines and slender lovely curves, a beauty whose full effect could not be ascertained

at once. A beauty that might be overlooked in the presence of more commanding charms, and that yet to those once entangled in its fine meshes afforded ever fresh ground for wonder at the subtle perfection of its completeness—until to those who watched the soft flush rising beneath the soft darkness of the cheek, the little delicate ears with the rippling hair above, the dark light of the eyes with the darker lashes and lovely curves of eyebrows to give completeness to their charm, it might seem a matter of doubt whether anything so beautiful ought in common fairness to have a soul *as well*.

And Lord Farnim had loved her. Leaning on her hands before the glass Minna found it necessary to repeat that statement to herself, as a man repeats the words of the spell from which his faith has passed. Alas! Those old times that had been in the sunlight of the summer did not return again, the eyes that rested on her their sober glance had in them no hungry light to give her terror or confusion now.

And yet after all what more should he have done, or what further had she right or power to demand of him? He came daily, hastening

always the arrangements for the wedding that should complete the binding of their lives. He had long interviews on every day alone with her. On the occasion of that third visit he had left the engravings on the table, and after that he often asked her what jewels or presents she would like, listening always with close attention to her words. Then the presents arrived, beautifully encased in velvet, forwarded from the shops from which they came. Minna felt that he had not looked at them himself, and after she had opened them with shy blushes, and smiled over and admired them, and listened to the wondering comments or envying admiration of the rest, she would take them up to her room that she might be alone with them, and then laying them on the table, would turn away from them sometimes with a cold and sickened sensation, or with something that stirred in her heart like the hot rage of an insulted womanhood. Other men did not present their gifts like this. But they looked very beautiful on her arms and neck in spite of that.

Perhaps but for them she would not have had patience to persist—they ensured to her that sense of present triumph which she desired.

The stake for which she played was of value in her eyes, and she dared not risk the explanations which might give her safety, but might ruin it all.

And so it was that day after day she endured her interviews with him, sat quietly by his side, answered his questions, talked of the news of the day, or made arrangements with his help. Often and often when she was alone she arranged some course of dramatic action for herself, some added timidity or tenderness, or soft allusions to past troubles, or reproaches of the father through whom distress had come. She even thought of whispered self-accusation and of the troubled penitence that needs to be soothed before it can think itself forgiven. But always when she was alone with him with his eyes upon her, talking in the low subdued tones that they used when they were together, she knew that she could make no allusion to the past. He preferred to ignore it, and she dared not break that silence and confront herself with him.

And meanwhile what were his feelings? what did he think during those hours in which he made arrangements for his wedding, or sat alone

with her? Minna had no means of judging, her little reckonings that had seemed complete enough before had passed now into the deeper waters that they had no skill to sound. He was very quiet always, very reserved and composed. Never once did he lose his self-possession, of the nervous eager love that had once closed its fingers over the open blade he gave no sign at all. And yet she felt that in some strange way she still had power over him. He cared to look at no one else when she was near. He liked to sit close to her when they were alone, saying little, watching her, as a man might watch some beautiful animal of whose ways he was not secure as yet. And after all that had happened he was going to marry her. It seemed impossible to her that when they were once together she should not have the skill and power to gain all that she required at last.

Perhaps it was impossible that she should not have confidence in the power of the charm that had never failed before. Her loveliness would be near him, and the gentle, tender arts that win mankind were no new spells to her. It

might be a slower task than she was accustomed to, but she must succeed at length.

So she trusted. But yet even in these early days there was one thing that touched her slightly with a perplexity and mortification that she had not felt before. Minna had never troubled herself to learn more than was absolutely needful for her life, the French and German phrases that she was required to speak or write, the dancing and card-playing that were necessary, and the few French novels of doubtful character that added amusement to her days. Beneath all her outward gifts and carefully-trained faculties she had that inward want of refinement and of culture that attends the uneducated mind. Now, when she was alone with this man who did not speak to her of love, the conversation often turned upon subjects in which she was compelled to a silence to which she was not accustomed, in which she felt that she could give to him no companionship at all. Such knowledge had not seemed desirable before.

Yet once more. In spite of all that has been said, it must not be supposed that her mind, beset with troubles as it was, ever paused to consider that this future that she dreaded for herself might

be hard as well for him, that she might be forcing out of him the hard bargain that she should have had no power to demand. These thoughts, or thoughts like them, did not occur to her. From her point of view the transaction was a fair one enough, prepared though she was to gain and accept from it wealth, jewels, estates, a title, a secured position, and a name more honoured than her own. The sense of inequality did not trouble her. She gave him her beauty, and that was more than enough for him.

So the days passed on—dresses, arrangements, presents, interviews—passing into each other like the shifting successions of a dream, the cake was ordered, the ring was bought, and the wedding-day itself drew near at last. Then at last—in these last days when help was scarcely possible,—Minna began to tremble at the future that rose close before her then. Perhaps it was a reaction from excitement, perhaps the sense of his coldness, perhaps a dread of the new strange life that she seemed to have so little strength to meet. Often and often she cried, locking herself up alone in her own room that others might have no suspicion of her tears; Oh, why was he

so strange, so cold, he might alter his manner and be more tender now? Sometimes a fear came over her that he would never alter, and that with that unfathomed glance always on her she would have to pass her life with him.

Sometimes another fear succeeded—in those long hours when she kept the watches of the night, and saw her eyes large with tears like a child's, and the wet lashes drooping on the delicate brown paleness of her cheeks. And as it slowly grew and grasped she could feel that her face became more pale and drawn, her eyes dilated and dried with terror from their tears. What *had* become of all that passionate affection he once had felt for her? What if burning concealed feelings lurked still beneath the calm—and when she was alone with him—in a foreign land—beyond reach of help? Minna had not a nature to endure easily the thought of physical pain or fear, her fingers would tighten their clasp and the delicate throat would shrink as if she felt already against it the cold touch of the bare steel that she had seen. Then she would break down into helpless passionate tears again. But by the

next morning she would be calm, and give no sign of what she felt.

The rest can be told quickly. The preparations for the wedding went on swiftly and secretly, even the servants were not told the exact date till the morning on which it took place. For though Lord Farnim had no near relations it was thought better to avoid the disturbance that the rumour of such a marriage might create. The morning was pale, stormy, and cold; there were no guests, and Minna in her white dress, her guardian, and his two daughters in pale gray, were driven in a cab that had been ordered only a few minutes before to a distant church. As quietly they all returned and had the wedding breakfast together.

Agnes and Ennie thought they had never cared so much for the bride as in the last few moments; when, robed now at last in her brown furred travelling dress, she clung to them, with caressing lingering embraces of hands and arms, with soft movements—putting up her cheek against theirs, returning and yet returning again as if she could not let go the touch of them at last. Alas! it was the sense of human contact to which she was

clinging, as with the dark great sea beyond a man may cling to frail spars before the waters come.

In another instant their straining eyes could catch the smile and bow she gave to them, and could see the grave set face of her young husband as she took her position by his side. And then the carriage drove away down the street. The Leap Year wedding was over.

CHAPTER IV

IT was over, beyond the reach of hindrance or interruption now—gone out into that silence in which the past lies stored. And here then we also, having reached this accomplishment, might for a while at least desire no more. For it is of that Leap Year wedding and of that only that these first few chapters have to tell. Nevertheless, the scene of the wedding-day itself leaves always a sense as of that which is not finished on the mind, and needs one more at least to make completeness sure. We have had the proposal, the engagement, and the

marriage. Let us take the one further step that shall end that which is preliminary, and have the coming home as well.

Only, pausing yet one moment before that final commencement, let us remember the words of the historian on the nation of which he wrote, for that which is true of a nation can have its individual sense as well. History is never recommenced. There is no beginning, however entire, no change, however sudden, that has not within its being the woven threads of which the past was formed.

And, having realised that, let us pass on to our last commencing scene at once.

* * * * *

The sun was shining on the bright June afternoon. More than three months had passed since the February marriage, the honeymoon was over, and Lord and Lady Farnim were being driven to their home.

No more lovely day could have been desired for that conclusion to a bridal journey. A strong cool wind swept the branches of trees which had still their spring freshness, and stirred into feathery lightness the white flakes which rested

in the blue sky far above. The fields in which cows were feeding were golden with buttercups, the white thorn bushes had not yet lost their glory, and beyond trees and fields blue distances rested clear against the sky. It was one of those days of early summer which retain in their loveliness some of the indescribable charm and freshness of the spring—at once the hope and the fruition of the year.

No wonder then that, breathed under such circumstances, the air which was indeed sweet with perfumes should bear intoxication too. It seemed indeed to have produced that effect on one within the carriage, the richly-dressed lady who had entered it with drooping head, but who now had changed her attitude, and raised the dark loveliness of her face towards the distant view. The splendour of the summer was round her; the breezes that touched her lips were sweet with May: it was the second bridal journey of her life.

Perhaps her lips and dark eyes were a little more wistful than was quite appropriate to the occasion, and her little gloved hands lay unclaimed upon her lap. In spite of these things the lovely grace of her attitude, the beauty of her face,

and the rich elegance of her blue velvet travelling attire made of Minna a very perfection of a bride. And her companion, who leant back by her side, though he had not much about him of the radiance of a bridegroom, had still in the curiously reserved look of his boyish face the tired yet satisfied manner of a man who, being weary of travel, finds himself near home at last.

Indeed he had reason to be joyful. So young, the owner of rich estates, with his bride so close to him—there would seem no more to be desired.

And Minna, sitting now in that less drooping attitude, with her face raised to look before her into the distance? Something of exultation indeed had touched her heart, and brought a glow into her cheeks even though her lips were wistful, a feeling of intoxication to which she had not been used before. The honeymoon, and even that last day of it, had known its depression and its trouble; that very morning she had been obliged to keep herself with care from tears, but now—the sense of luxuriousness was round her, the easy carriage, the splendid horses, the home that was so near, her husband's care, all these things were hers. For the first time it began

to appear to her possible that she might find these things enough.

‘The wind is rather keen, Minna. Will you not draw that thing closer round you?’ her husband said.

And, leaning a little forward, he fastened it himself. Through all the three months they had spent together she had been used to these little actions from him, and had learned to like the touch of his hands, even though there seemed a curious absence of tenderness in the care he took of her. At this instant, with that new sense of triumph and success upon her mind, she felt happy enough to reward him with a look—a sweet lingering expression, such as she might have used of old. His hand was still upon her mantle, and he finished fastening its clasp before he leant back again, but he gave no response at all to that.

Minna leant back also, a little graver. The summer sunlight shone on the fields of buttercups, the hedges were white with May blossom, but they were driven onwards in silence through the lanes. And yet—this beautiful day—the home tha

was so near—surely she might be at rest and happy now.

Then she had not been happy, and those three months of honeymoon had been no time of bliss to her? Perhaps not; and yet the want in them was one that could not be easily defined. They had gone from place to place; she had seen new things and old—Dutch pictures, German cathedrals, Italian scenery; she had renewed her knowledge of many things that she had seen before, had met old acquaintances, who were more inclined to be more respectful now, and had even seen her father for a few minutes in that German town and resort of gamblers that he had selected for his home. All these things had passed, and the thought of them should have been tinged now with a delightful newness, and yet it was not—rather they seemed to her old and dreary, and as if she had known them all her life, as she seemed to have known the look of care and pain on the face of the companion who had been always by her side.

He had been very attentive to her, careful of her, guarding her weakness always with the little assistances with which she felt he would

have been ready to protect any woman, though he lavished them thousand-fold upon his wife. In everything he had been alike, had carried her mantle or done her errands himself, and had given her no just cause or reason to complain of him. And yet in spite of that it was strange that more and more she felt the dream fail which had told her that her arts and beauty must have their influence upon his heart at last. Something came between — the magic of her charms had no power to take effect—now, even now, so near to their home, her comfort lay only in telling herself for the first time that this pleasure might not after all be entirely needful for her life. She would have the care, the luxury, the title she desired, and no doubt, in time, from other sources at least, she would have the admiration too.

Once, only once, tired with travel and depression, her sudden anger had flamed out on him, and she had accused him bitterly of hardness and neglect of her. He had answered gently and very coldly that they had better let that subject rest until they had arrived at home. That conversation had taken place the day before at Dover, and all through this

Last morning his answer had rested like an undefined weight upon her mind.

Since they had spoken those words they had come up to London, had slept in a hotel, and were now travelling down together. It had seemed to her as if for a few hours after that conversation he had avoided her, and as if there had gathered slowly on his face the absorbed look that she had felt sometimes upon her own. But that was yesterday, and now as they travelled together and drew nearer to their home he became every moment more at ease, and the old attention had returned, transformed only into redoubled care for her.

White May, broken fancies, lanes and fields with buttercups, the sweetness of the air and of the summer-time, the sense, now again renewed, of a bridal journey, these things, so seen and felt, left their dreamy impress on her mind, as there came stealing round her in the quietness a sense of possible peace and rest unknown before. And still they went on swiftly and silently through the lanes.

How thin and worn in his shabbiness her father had looked, how threadbare, even though

he was refined and graceful still. How wretched and dingy his lodgings were, how weary the profitless life of travel and changes and constantly varying companions that she had shared so long with him. Ah, bah! she would not go back to that at least again, she had chosen more wisely for herself. The sun was sinking lower, and lengthening the shadows, and flooding the fields with light, she leant back and felt in the midst of calm and rest. The bridal journey must soon be ended now.

Ah, here it all was, like a dream made tangible, the dark trees of the park, and the pretty lodge, and the curtseying old woman at the gate. And her husband smiled radiantly as he lifted his hat, and she smiled and bowed as well, and they were swept onwards still; and low lying light was upon the grass of the park, and trees stood in clusters, and between them could be caught first glimpses of the old gray house beyond. Minna felt her breath grow tighter as she looked. Then came another gate, with trees growing round it dark and thick, and the gray horses swept swiftly round them—and she closed her eyes—and in another instant they were before the steps.

The front door was open. Servants were standing there. It was all like a dream. And then in another instant Lord Farnim had jumped with quickness from the carriage, and was giving her his hand to help her to descend, removing his hat as he did so. Bareheaded, and with his bride upon his arm, he mounted the steps, and they entered their home together.

A spacious, dark, stone-paved hall, servants, a great black mastiff who came up to be caressed—these things were round them at once. Minna could see dimly the dark oak presses, the pictures that lined the walls from floor to ceiling, and the bronze statues in the corners. A sense of confusion was on her. She could scarcely collect herself enough to remember that she must play her part gracefully as the lady of the house, and it was only with an effort that she could raise her head and look round her as she stood. She had almost forgotten her husband, though her hand was still upon his arm, till he looked round on her and spoke. Afterwards she remembered, as if it had been some vivid dream his square, pale young face, the glow in his dark eyes, and even the short wave of fair hair

that had been pressed down upon his forehead by his hat. There had been something like exultation in his manner as he ascended the steps with her, but it was changed into anxiety now.

‘You are very tired. Will you come upstairs and rest?’ he said, and they went on together.

Minna was indeed tired, for her limbs were trembling, and the ringing in her brain prevented her from making any observations as she went—she was only dimly conscious of the broad low stairs and dark painted windows that stained them with colours as they passed. Then they had reached the broad landing above, and then were in her own rooms at length.

These were three, opening out into each other, large, rich, luxuriously furnished, with the sinking sun pouring in on them its level light. In the second of the three, the dressing-room, Lord Farnim paused, and Minna found herself placed in an arm chair, so soft and low, with such delicious ease in its velvet cushions that it seemed almost like rest itself. The housekeeper had followed them, but he placed the footstool for her feet himself, and took from her hand the hat and

mantle she resigned. She leant back, pleased with the ease and rest, the beauty of her face none the less to be observed because the dark ripples of her hair hung, loosened by travel, round its charms, and because the waving colours of the long feathers shaded her dark loveliness no longer. The housekeeper stood near, lost in admiration, as she saw, and her husband lingered also by her side. His face was very pale, and there was a curious intent look in his eyes, but he seemed anxious for her comfort still.

‘They shall bring you some coffee,’ he said, ‘I know you like that, and it will rest you most. And I will leave you alone now for an hour or two to rest.’

She raised her eyes and smiled at him. If the housekeeper had not been present I think she would have risen and thrown herself into his arms—the passionate gratitude that demands a demonstration was rising against her expectation in her heart. It might be perhaps that all this time he had wished for more from her. But when he came back—and they were alone.

He left the room, the housekeeper left the room—she lay and rested still. Then came the

coffee, in the delicate blue and gold china that she once had told him she preferred. And then she was once more alone—only that she heard the sounds of footsteps and arrangements in the next room—and then these too were gone and there was silence.

She lay still and rested. There are moments in which we are too luxuriously tired to think, content with the sense of ease and rest around. It was so to her in these dreaming bridal hours, in this unfamiliar place, with this feeling of achievement on her soul. She would not stay to consider, the soft cushions were round her, she might rest now.

She slept a little and woke, and slept to wake again. The golden sunlight, sinking as it was, was still round her, and round the beautiful objects that were near her as she lay. There was one pretty thing on which her eyes often rested, a portrait that hung over the antique toilet table, with its little rows of drawers, and upright carved-framed mirror, a portrait of a lady in a shady hat, with a crook and ribbons resting against her white dress, and with dark and smiling eyes. Perhaps she

also had been a bride, and had slept in these rooms when her new life was young. It was pleasant to think of that, fancies came and went so pleasantly.

Had she not all these things, and her loveliness too? All these things were hers; she had done well truly for herself. And now the rest would come. And so thinking and dreaming she lay back and slept again.

That deeper sleep had passed into a half wakeful consciousness, the golden sunlight was failing fast into shadows round her, when she heard footsteps near the door, and roused herself at once. Her maid was there with a message to her from Lord Farnim, to ask her if she were rested and if he could come to her.

Minna answered only by an assenting sign, and was left alone again, to draw herself into an easy attitude of dainty grace, to smooth her blue velvet, and to arrange the diamond clasp that fastened the knot of ribbons on her shoulder. These actions, so slight as to be scarcely conscious, took but a few instants to complete, but before they were ended she heard her husband's footsteps at the door. It was strange that she felt



no inclination to rush forward and embrace him now.

For one instant he seemed to pause, standing there at the door. Then he came in, shut the door carefully, and drew the bolt. The door leading into the bedroom was partly open, he closed that as well. Then he came and stood near her. Their eyes met. Her heart seemed to stop beating. His face was haggard, but his voice came clearly and distinctly, even quickly, as he spoke.

‘Minna,’ he said, ‘it is time to end this farce of ours at last. I said—I told myself, that I would hold out until we came to this. We will separate to-night. I will not spend a night within this home of mine with you.’

CHAPTER V

THEY remained silent, looking at each other. Minna felt not the smallest inclination to move, or speak. She remained perfectly still, leaning back against the velvet cushions, her little lovely feet crossed, and her hands lying loosely in her lap. Even in that moment she could feel the rest of her position. But there had come a curious withered paleness in her face.

Lord Farnim stood looking at his bride. She lay there before him in her beauty, the dark blue background behind her, the jewels that he had

given her round her neck and on her shoulder, her dark lashes drooping on her cheeks. A low exclamation crossed his lips, and then he trembled a little, and then was silent again.

‘Oh, God,’ he muttered, low at last, ‘why was I allowed to tie myself to you?’

He was a young man still, and the pain of his excitement kept his face pale whilst he spoke. The young, square, sober face, that even in his shy youth had preserved to those who knew it well its power of passionate earnestness, that had been under such hard restraint during those three months of honeymoon, was entirely absorbed into passionateness now. The trembling of a great scorn was in it—he could restrain himself no longer.

‘All my life spoilt!’ he said. ‘We are married, we have lived three months together. There is no escaping out of that.’

Still Minna remained silent and answered neither by word or glance. Her long lashes drooped upon the brown paleness of her cheeks; her roughened hair made a dark shadow behind the oval dainty charms of her face. Only the lovely lips had taken a hard and bitter curve, they gave no

other sign than that; young, lovely she looked, and he—standing near with his dark eyes fixed on her and the light upon his paleness, and the fair hair that however much it was cropped would still attempt to wave in its shortness like a boy's, looked young almost as she. Young—just married—the life that they were to share together and should have been before them then—

He walked on a few steps, he came back and stood before her again. In those few instants he had been schooling himself, the look of terrible passion was almost subdued within his face. He spoke in a low set voice, with the restraint in his manner that he had learned.

'Minna,' he said in that low voice, 'you have a right to ask me what I mean by this. I did marry you, I know,' (even in that moment he did not give her the reminder he might have done). 'I have to blame myself for that. But I meant no harm by it, before God I did not! I thought you were alone, helpless, I fancied you might have been directed by your father in—in all these things that have passed. And I—I remembered that I had loved you.'

For one instant he paused, drawing in his

breath with a hissing sound that was strange to hear. Minna had shrunk a little, but for that she was quite still. She lay back against the cushions and let his words fall like unaverted blows.

‘I was afraid, even in our engagement I was afraid—I felt then how it would be, and that all my life was ruined. But I said to myself that you were alone, that I might save you, that I ought to keep my word. I was a fool and an idiot. God did not demand so much of me as that.’

Again silence, whilst his hasty breathing made a sound like fever in the room. And then, as if he could restrain himself no longer, he broke out on her again.

‘You—you—what have you in you that should make any man care for you? You have no thought but of yourself, no heart, no education, no power of affection in your soul. Oh, what it has been to me to see you so exulting in the title you have forced from me, to see you try your finest arts on me, and put up your face to me as if we loved each other, and that pretence could please! Whom do you care for? Not for your

father, not for me, not for the man who died through you. You have no power of caring or of loving in your soul. At least I will not have you near me to spoil my life for me.'

The blows were falling more heavily now. Minna sat silent, her dark lashes drooping, her lips pale and curved into a slight and scornful smile. After a while, and with a greater effort over himself, he spoke to her again.

'I ought not to speak like this to you,' he said, 'you must forgive me that. Indeed I have tried to spare you all I could. I have thought how it should be—I will go away suddenly—now—as if some message had come for me, then to-morrow morning I will return—they will think it is some sudden business—and go away back to the Continent at once. You drive me from my home, but that is only a small part of all you do for me.'

A deep silence, a silence like death. They did not move, they did not even look at each other. The words that had just been spoken seemed between them, as if they were separated already. And then with a long deep sigh that came with

the effort of speaking he turned his eyes to her again.

‘You know the address of my lawyer in London,’ he said, very quietly, ‘you may communicate with me through him. It will not be so hard for you as it may seem. People will think I have been obliged to leave you—they will get used to my absence at last. And this house and estate will be yours for the present at any rate. You will have gained these things at least.’

A sharp quick breath, the first sound she had uttered, was Minna’s only answer to his words. It seemed to excite him for he went on with more passionateness now.

‘I can’t help it, I could not bear it,’ he muttered. Then, suddenly subdued, and looking at her with a cold and curious smile—

‘After all, you will have done well enough for yourself,’ he said. ‘And you may comfort yourself with thinking that if you have to blame me, at any rate you have punished me enough. You will have my name, my house, my money, I will see that you have everything you need. If I cannot bear to be near you, at least

I will do as much for you as that. And I'——
and here he paused.

'I shall have no wife, no home, if it please God,
no child either, to bear my name, and look with
your eyes at me—And I have lived three months
with you—and I have loved you—surely that
ought to be enough—

'I loved you once—I know you better now.'

Their eyes met. Minna still leaned against the
velvet cushions, with that smile upon her face,
and with her little hands lying loosely on her
lap. But at that moment there came a quivering
in the dainty fingers, as if possibly she might
have liked to raise them and hide her face with
them. She restrained herself with an effort, she
leant back with the same smile, and waited
quietly for more.

'I shall expect you to live here for the present,
at least,' he went on, with the same effort that
came when he was quiet. 'Your father is provided
for, so you need not fear for him. If you bring
him or any of your old associates to the place, if
you compromise yourself or my name in any way,
you will lose what you otherwise have from me.
That is all.'

He came closer to her, looking with steady eyes at the pale loveliness leaning against the velvet cushions with that strange smile upon its lips. His eyes seemed fascinated, the next words came in a low voice, and as if they were forced from him against his will.

‘You have made me suffer enough ; but, at least, you shall not gain all for which you hoped. If I could have found anything in you that was not false it would have been different for us both.’

Again a long silence, a long endless pause in which neither moved nor breathed. And then he spoke once more :

‘It is better as it is. We shall fool each other no longer. Goodbye.’

Moving backwards, with his eyes still on her, he reached the door—he opened it, closed it, and was gone. She still sat motionless. His footsteps went down the landing, then there was silence. After a long while she heard the sound of a horse being brought round to the front door, and then his voice beneath. Then there was the rattle of horse hoofs on the gravel, and then that sound too was gone.

Another long while passed, and then footsteps

paused before her door. It was her maid come to see if she could do anything for her. With a sick stunned feeling Minna roused herself at last; and even in that instant could find herself able to keep up some deception still. No—she wanted nothing—could eat nothing—only she must be left alone. This sudden message, come for Lord Farnim, had upset her so much, though it was foolish of her, she knew. And then the pitying maid drew blinds and curtains, and lighted the wax candles in both the rooms. Would she not have something—some dinner—a little tea—a little something to do her good at least? No; she would have nothing; only she must be left alone that night. And then in that solitude of large rooms, and darkness, and wax candles, she was left once more alone.

But now, at last, she moved, she raised her aching head from the cushions against which it had lain so long; she got up; she walked, with trembling footsteps, up and down the room. Then she put out the candles and went into the bedroom, and locked both the doors, and put out the candles there. And then she got up upon the bed. She did not lie down, she did not take off

her jewels, or remove the velvet dress that had made bridal attire for her that day; she only lay forwards upon her face, with her knees drawn up under her, crouching together in a heap, and still. After a long while the cramped attitude made her move at last, and she laid her head down upon the pillows in the darkness, but there came no power of sleep.

The first night—the first night in the new home. The words repeated themselves monotonously, but they brought no comfort in their sound, for the first time there was no hope in the future years that lay before her. What had she left to hope or plan for now? She had gained what she desired, and had gained it to lie alone in the darkness, forsaken, deserted, in the midst of the luxury for which she had sold herself. He had turned round on her, he had made of her the betrayed and the deceived, the fever of the words that he had spoken rang still within her ears. And yet, whilst this sense burnt deep into her soul, she had no power to cry out against him, as she had felt no power to answer him whilst he spoke; her sickened consciousness, stunned and desolate, had not strength enough for that.

She was all false, he did not love her, no man could care for her. The scourged soul, writhing under the deeper insight that had come with another's words, had no power to hide itself within the darkness now, the light falling upon its smallness and its bareness had found it and had judged. And yet she was in the darkness—left alone—far away from companionship and help. The hours passed onwards in the night-time.

Slowly, slowly passed the night. The little clock in the room chimed half-hours and quarters, there was an aching yeariness of darkness, a sense of tired fatigue, of fever and of pain. And then, behind the white blinds came the faint light, and it grew stronger, and the birds began to sing to the day-break. She turned her head then and hid her face in the pillow, that she might not through the dimness see the room in which she lay. No, she was left alone, there was no hope of help for her. Through all her life she would be alone, she would have round her no husband's arms, no children's voices—it did not seem as if she had strength to wish for more. And then lying with closed eyes, it seemed as if in

dim vision she could both see and feel a wandering, her own soul wandering far out into the night. And then the ceaseless fatigue seemed to overcome her senses, and she slept.

Hours afterwards she awoke with startled suddenness, and raising her head was amazed at the tired pain that almost overcame her as she moved. The light was bright within the room, she could see the carved furniture, the brocaded hangings, the old family pictures and portraits on the walls. Was this her home?

Refusing to admit her maid, she got down off the bed, and sat down wearily before the glass. Ah! how pale and strained her face looked, how wretched and dishevelled her attire. Tears came, forcing their way between the fingers in which her face was hidden, but only for a few moments, the thought of her husband was within her mind, and she would not give way to weakness whilst he might still be close.

The remembrance of the words that had been last night rested like burning pain within her heart, but at the same time it must not be supposed that she had any idea of demanding an interview with her husband, and flinging at him as his last

and direst insult that offer of home and wealth with which the burning words were closed. Her despair and her hatred would have made no satisfaction out of that—it was comfort still, in the midst of the misery, to be able to secure all she could from him, to remember that whilst he hated her, his own word must still bind him to grant her the luxuries that she desired. In his home, keeping him from it, keeping him wifeless and childless—there was some relief in that.

And then, even whilst she thought these things, there came before her the voice, the eyes, that had spoken and had looked at her, and her whole heart and soul became filled with the burning pain again. At least she must do what she could to punish him for that.

With this end in view, she rang half-an-hour later for her maid, and completed an elaborately simple toilette with pains and care. It was a comfort at first that the wretched, dishevelled look should at least be gone—the coils of dark rippling hair, carefully fastened so as to display the dainty set of her head, felt in their very neatness a most exquisite relief. But she desired much more effect than this. The hated blue

velvet she had carefully hidden from sight with her own hands, she desired no richness of bridal attire to-day. This should be all summer radiance, and the simplicity of innocence itself. She selected a morning robe of white muslin over crimson silk, loose and light, gathered in by its belt of crimson satin at the waist, and with child-like ribbons about it to redeem the plainness of its form. Everything about her was simple when she had done, and yet it was all complete, down to the crimson bows upon her little shoes, and the big rubies in the brooch that fastened her dress beneath her throat. Her eyes had dark shadows indeed beneath them, and her lips looked pale and strained, but these were small things, and she could almost have clapped her hands, as a child might have done, to find herself so beautiful again.

She sat down in the large gray arm chair in her bedroom to rest, and had a little morning meal of coffee and biscuits, and felt almost revived. Yet she could not have walked without trembling, so she kept still where she was. Her heart beat so fast at intervals that she could scarcely breathe, with the sound of a distant footstep or the noise

of the shutting of a door; but then it was scarcely to be expected that she could be calm whilst her husband was still so close. These physical sensations were miserable. She counted the hours for this morning to be over.

About eleven o'clock there was brought to her a note from Lord Farnim. It contained only these few words:

'I start at twelve, but it will keep up appearances better if I come back first and take my leave of you.'

She tore up his letter into the smallest fragments when she had read it, and put them into the fireplace. Then she prepared to receive him. She had been lying on the sofa in her dressing-room, but she went now back into her bedroom again, and sat down in the great arm-chair at the foot of the bed. A resolve was in her that she would not get up or stir or speak to him. Yet for her own sake she would not forbid him an entrance either; they might keep up appearances to the end. She waited; it seemed long while before he came. At last, at about twenty minutes to twelve, she heard his footsteps, his knock at her dressing-room door, and

then at her bedroom door, and then he came in.

He closed the door, gave one rapid glance, and then remained standing with his back to it, his head erect but his eyes cast down. His face was pale, haggard, resolute. He looked as if he had not slept. He did not move or look at her, and even his lips were still. She lay back in the summer radiance of her young disdainful beauty, and looked at him. Neither stirred. The minutes seemed to pass between them. A long time passed, they remained motionless, scarcely even breathing. And then the clock chimed the four quarters and struck its twelve strokes at last.

Then he moved. He came one step forwards, he raised his head and looked hastily at her. There had been misery upon his face, but it seemed almost now to have relief. He met the disdainful stillness of her eyes and of her lips—there came a curious smile upon his own, and then he came yet one step nearer to her and spoke.

‘I suppose you do not expect me to kiss you,’ he said.

Minna did not know what possessed her in that instant. She had been sitting quite calmly,

with her little fingers clasped in front of her. Now, stung to sudden madness, she started to her feet, flinging out at him rather than towards him her clasped hands and rigid extended arms. 'Oh, you are cruel, cruel,' she cried, and then throwing herself into the armchair she turned away from him with shuddering horror, and hid her face in her arms. He remained perfectly still for one minute where he was. Then he turned, she heard the door close, heard the door of the dressing-room close, and then he was gone.

No—once again she had to listen to the pawing of a horse upon the gravel, to hear the sounds of the bustle of departure, and then the horse-hoofs, sharply distinct at first, fainter as they died away into the distance like departing hope. When the silence was complete around, her courage could sustain her no longer, and she cried.

'They may deny me to all visitors for the present, Norris,' said Lady Farnim to her maid. 'This sudden departure of Lord Farnim has been very trying for us both. For the next few days I must be at rest and quiet.'

Indeed she needed leisure in which to consider now.

CHAPTER VI

THE next few days passed like an uneasy dream. Minna kept within her room—for the greater part of the time within her bed; she was nervously ill and feverish, and felt no desire to rise.

Already it seemed as if she must have been some long time in captivity and knew the prison of her apartment well—the family portraits and pictures on the walls, the gray brocaded hangings, the old carved furniture and ornaments about the place. Lying awake there in the hot and sultry evenings, she could watch the light grow dim upon the lady

with her pet lamb in her arms upon the wall, or could see the faint gleam of the night light upon the table in the night, and hear the rush of the wind in the darkness through the trees. She grew tired of the slow coming of the morning, when she had drawn up a blind that she might observe through the dim dawn the white mists within the park; she wearied of the heat of noon as she lay with the gray hangings round her, parched with fever and exhaustion, on her bed. And yet through it all there was something pleasant in the dreaming sense of rest, she had been under a strain of inward care so long.

She lay and rested, she dreamt and thought, submitted to the waiting of servants, and allowed herself slowly to be revived. These hours of rest in spite of all that had gone were golden times to her. And yet she was not entirely idle, it was not in her nature to let the present moment pass and lose the fruit that only then perhaps it might be possible to gain.

Already with reviving strength came hopes and plans again; the soul of the schemer, crushed and desolate with failure, has no resource but to turn its crushed failing hopes with such strength

as it may have left back to its schemes once more. It was so then with her.

Her first action, on the very day on which her husband left her, was to write to his lawyer in London, as he had said. It was a pretty and pathetic letter; she thought it better to assume her injured position at once. She begged to be made acquainted with Lord Farnim's movements, and to know in what manner he intended to provide for her, or to guard her from the unjust suspicion to which his cruel capriciousness must expose her. Finally, in a few graceful sentences she expressed her confidence in the gentleman whom she addressed, and trusted that in her desolate position she might count upon him as a friend in whom to trust.

By return of post came to her an answer that was very obliging, courteous, and composed. Mr Grimson regretted exceedingly the unhappy differences that had arisen between Lady Farnim and her husband, and trusted that in process of time these might yet be overcome. Meanwhile he was authorised to say that every arrangement should be made for Lady Farnim's comfort that she could herself desire, and that he was him-

self empowered to supply her with an annual income of two thousand pounds, subject to the pleasure of Lord Farnim, who would be ready to increase the amount, if such extension should be found necessary, or desirable. Finally, he trusted he might be permitted to add that Lord Farnim had been most careful to intimate in the plainest terms that the cause of this unhappy separation rested in no other reason whatever than that of unsuitability of dispositions, and that he had not the smallest doubt that his lordship would be found ready at any moment to protect a name that was, in fact, his own.

This was the letter, in a neat legal handwriting, precise as the sentences it transcribed. A postscript added a few more words that Minna devoured with more eagerness than she had bestowed upon the rest. These stated that Lord Farnim had already left England, and was on his way to Germany where he intended to reside for some time. The writer believed it to be his desire to remain for the greater part at least of the next few years abroad, though in the fourth year from the present date his business affairs would oblige him to be in England for a while. Minna

pondered over this date with a curious thrill that she found it difficult to explain to herself. The sense of a superstitious gladness whispered that another Leap Year might bring new hope to her.

Meanwhile, though Mr Grimson professed himself ready to forward any letters, he did not bestow upon her the address of her husband—an omission that for the present at least did not much signify to her. She had other things of which to think—her neighbours, the opinions of society, her own forsaken position, all subjects for a consideration that could no longer be neglected now.

Lying on her pillows with the gray brocaded hangings falling round her, and the golden afternoon sunlight on the park beyond, Minna, revived by some hours of rest, could consider these difficulties well. Two courses were open to her, each capable of much in such skilful management as hers. On the one hand she could at once declare herself a deceived, neglected, and cruelly forsaken wife, deserted by the man who had vowed to protect her, and left alone in the midst of the wealth that had no value to her now. Her youth,

her beauty, and her forlorn position would rouse some interest at once, and she could be certain that the men of the neighbourhood at least would soon take part with her. But then, on the other hand, though she could no doubt accomplish as much as this, there remained difficulties that she had less power to prevent. The injustice and wretchedness of her position rested in the fact that the story already made public would bear its weight against her protestations now, and that innocent as she was, the world would not be altogether ready to believe that in real truth her husband had no sufficient reason to complain of her. Some sort of position and admiration she might indeed secure, but such only as might in future times prove a hindrance to that more assured position to which it was still her ambition to attain. It seemed to her that with skill and patience she might attain it yet.

On the whole, then, it appeared best to her to wait, to accept as silently as possible the theory that some sudden necessity had called her husband from her, and to display to the neighbourhood the spectacle of a solitary and devoted bride. It might come to pass that in future

times the little world of society round her, beholding her still deserted and devoted, might suppose that unworthy reasons were keeping Lord Farnim from her side, and that during the absence that he had intended to be temporary he had found new attractions that he had not the courage to resist. Minna found comfort in that thought, for the same reason that made her find comfort in the certainty, gained from a knowledge of her husband's character, that he would *not* in his loneliness resort to such pleasures as can make other men forget easily the wives that they have lost.

Deserted, solitary, scorned, she would have been scarcely human if she had wished no suffering for him; and yet, though the words that he had spoken to her burnt still within her ears, though the glance with which he had looked at her remained unforgotten before her eyes, it was for future union with him that she hoped and waited still. She had ceased indeed to believe that from the ill-starred wedding any affection now could spring. She retained a bitter remembrance of his words to her, she would have punished him willingly

in any way that could have been possible to her; but it remained nevertheless true that by his side only could the material advantages she longed for be secured at all. After all it might have been but a tempest of young anger. He might return once more to her.

She would wait and trust, she would be quiet and self-restrained—it might be that before another Leap Year had dawned there would be new hope for her.

So the days passed. Now and then, as her slow strength renewed itself once more, she would rise in the afternoons or evenings and wander through the rooms, looking at the pictures, hearing her own footsteps in the loneliness, or pausing before some mirror that reflected her young living beauty in the midst. The gray house was terribly still, its dark rooms, its old-fashioned furniture had a strange silence; they seemed disturbed by her and she became almost afraid of them. The great drawing-room, whose elaborate ceiling was adorned with fruit and flowers, had been uncovered in honour of the return, and displayed openly the blue satin and velvet of its chairs and tables, but billiard-room and ball-room were swathed in

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holland still, and the bedrooms had a dreary emptiness as if they were not expecting to be filled. In the long picture gallery she could hear the sound of her footsteps yet more plainly, faces of forgotten ancestors looked out on her from dark corners in the passages, old-fashioned work that dead fingers had touched lent its ghostly charm to the apartments, and there was a great harp with broken strings within the music room. In one of the drawers of her bedroom she came upon a little fluffy rose upon a piece of canvas, dusty now with age, and with a rusty needle sticking in its uncompleted leaves. Everything seemed old and dreary, like some dead dream of an enchanted palace in which she was condemned to live.

Meanwhile, the sunlight fell upon the park without, and flowers were bright within the garden, and the sound of visitors' carriages rolled now and then upon the gravel, but she dared not go out or receive at home as yet. And even sunlight and flowers could not add too much of life to the place, the house was old and gray, lying low within a valley, from which the winds rose crawling and crept round the trees—it seemed alone and stern, and rather her prison than her

home. But since she must needs live in captivity **h**ere for a while she must learn to make the best of **i**t she could.

For this purpose she wrote once more to Mr **G**rimson, preferring after a short struggle with **h**er pride to receive her orders from him. She **t**old him that the house was lonely, and that even **i**f it were not so her position rendered it necessary **f**or her to have a companion to reside with her. **H**e might perhaps himself know of some lady **o**f straitened means who would be glad to secure such a position for her daughter, and he was at liberty himself to settle the amount of salary required. If he thought that Lord Farnim would in any way object to such a proceeding on her part, she would renounce the idea of it at once, but she could not see what possible difficulty could be made. However, in this as in all things she would be ready to be guided by his advice.

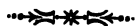
In a postscript she added also that the gentleman who had been Lord Farnim's agent had married and left the place some months before, and that as she knew nothing herself of the management of an estate she would be glad to have some

responsible manager to whom to appeal. Perhaps in this matter also Mr Grimson would kindly give her such assistance as he could.

This double appeal left the gray house at Landene on a damp June afternoon, when the sky was heavy behind the trees and the white mists were rising from the ground. It was to produce more effect than Minna had supposed when she wrote it; in a very few weeks the doors of her prison were indeed to open and admit companionship for her. But that we may understand something more of these, the companions of the captivity, some further knowledge must be gained.

Let us leave them then behind us for a while, the broken links, the gray prison, and the forsaken bride, and deserting for a time that titled loneliness, be content to learn instead what other homes are like.

Part Second.



Other Homes

CHAPTER I

IN a quiet London street was Amy's home. Amy had never known any other, had never lived in any other since she was four years old, and could not have imagined herself residing in any other house at all. Now and then indeed she had been in lodgings in the country, and once at the sea-side when the children were recovering from the measles, and once in a small room over a grocer's shop in a manufacturing town, to which her father had gone to hear a lecturer who was his friend—but these were rare treats, and not to

be enjoyed for long. In the quiet London street was her home, and there she sometimes remained, sleeping there each night in succession, from the beginning of the year until the end.

Under these circumstances one gets to know a house very well indeed, there comes even a certain sense of endlessness in our thoughts of it. Amy knew every turn and corner of this one, and the man who brought oranges in the winter to their door, and the woman who swept the crossing all the year round at one end of the street. At the other end was a church, large and graceful, with a spire pointing upwards, and many streets diverging from it as a common centre. This particular one was the quietest of them all—it was also the most varied, owning houses of all sizes and colours, forming into rows, existing separately, standing out into prominence, or falling back behind their gardens as they pleased. About half-way down was Dr Merse's house, a white house, semi-detached with only about two feet of dingy grass between it and the street. It had seemed a pleasant enough establishment when the doctor and his wife and Amy and the three babies

first arrived, but when eight other little Merses succeeded it became less easy to be content. Amy's room was upstairs. She shared it with two other sisters, and it was very hot in the summer time.

Lying awake for hours through the close and stifling nights, she could hear the distant tramp of many feet below, she knew the hour in which there comes a lull, and then those other sounds which tell that the great city has waked to morning life again. Then there would come a sound of crying through the wall, four-year-old Tommie had roused himself, and Amy must steal into the nursery to comfort him as best she could. Such nights do not always allow time enough for the sleep that is needed for the day.

Poor Amy ! The eldest of twelve, just eighteen, in a household that owned but a cook and a nurse-maid, with no sister near enough in years to help—it is not to be wondered at that she found hard times at home. In poorer classes the young girls, when they go out to service, have some liberty in choosing their employment at least; but in a poverty-stricken household such as this,

it is necessary to be everything all at once, and to be that everything also without hope of pay.

Yet she had gained some advantages from her position, for she only, out of all the seven girls, had received a day-school education, which education all her six sisters were now to receive at second-hand from her.

In age she was eighteen, as has been said, small, prettily formed, with a childish softness, and with hair that was fair and fine. Yet there was nothing about her prettiness that was in the least distracting; it was merely a childish face, contrasting pleasantly with the exceeding primness of her manner; a little face with delicately pencilled eyebrows, and eyes of a darker gray than might have been expected from its fairness, with that touch of blue in them too, that entitle friends to call them violet at once. Something wistful there was about her eyes and lips, but nothing in the least of impatience or passion—I think Amy had never known what it was to be in a passion in her life.

Yet she felt very wicked all the same, and mourned in secret over the want of patience of her mind. Because home life did seem at times

so very hard, and the children were so tiresome, and their lessons so wearing, and her back ached so much when she sat up to darn at nights; she considered and brooded over these things at times, but very silently, and to herself, for she had a little reserved soul, and was in no hurry to make her complaining known.

Again—poor Amy! More delicate than her mother, better educated than her mother, she found it more hard than her mother had done to give herself to the household duties that claimed her life. And, indeed, there is no use in denying that there are conditions of life that press with exceeding weight upon the young souls and bodies that have to grow up under them as best they may.

But here it is possible to be met by the statement that household duties form after all the highest ideal to which womanhood can aspire, and that a mother and sister need wish for no better pleasure or higher glory than that of seeing round them a well-ordered home. One can only reply that such a statement is indeed true, but that the highest good, in order

to be perfect, needs to be chosen, and that in the world around us curious consequences sometimes follow upon enforced ideals.

What, for instance, can be more beautiful than that fancy of an elder sister, guiding, directing, managing, clung to as a second mother by the younger lives that owe so much of their instruction and their guardianship to her? No doubt that ideal can be true. But then in real life tempers are short, and trials are wearing, and there comes a danger of unpleasant associations connected with the young souls over whom so much of care and anxiety has been spent, as there may rise in the young souls themselves a conviction that elder sisters are cross though necessary things, whom it would be pleasant to get rid of with the lesson-books as soon as the years for lesson-books are done.

Amy was not cross (except a little sometimes) and had besides the quick affection that could make her happy to be disturbed by Tommie in the night, when she received as a reward his wet eyelashes and hot kisses pressed against her face in the darkness. But she was delicate—a word that does not stand for happiness in a poor house-

hold, and her sensitiveness of nature could make her still more easily disturbed. More than that she had a love for studies, and there was a kind lady near at hand who gave her a weekly lesson in Italian and in music, which kindness was turned into a perpetual care and vexation because she had so seldom time allowed her in which to learn Italian or practise music at home.

As soon as she awoke she rose in the morning, however short her sleep had been, and when she was dressed went into the next room to assist the nurse-maid there. It took all the time and pains of both to get the seven little ones ready before the breakfast bell could ring. Then after breakfast she assisted with the cups and saucers, and then began the teaching of her six sisters, whilst her mother saw to the house-accounts and cook. When teaching was over she took the elder ones out into Kensington Gardens for a walk, from which they could only return when dinner time had come. After dinner there was an hour that she was supposed to have for herself, but there were generally many little matters in which she could assist her mother then. And then began teaching again, and then a walk

till tea. And after tea she sewed through all the evening at her mother's side, for all the mending of the family and most of the dresses were completed at home. It was often very late before she could get to sleep at last.

Where then in all this life could time be found for Italian, or for music, or for rest? Amy was young and delicate, and as years passed on the feeling of worried care began to become too prominent within her soul; though certainly it had not been able to produce any wrinkles yet.

One comfort she had that perhaps she was not able fully to understand, the constant attention that watched her silently from her mother's eyes. Mrs Merse was a little, bright, withered, dark-eyed creature, quick in temper and in action, devoted to her husband, careful of her household, and an excellent manager, though she had become a very careworn wife. She was not a woman of extended views or of open-handed charity, she never gave away more than she could help, and considered collections persecutions, and missionaries a mistake. But as the mother of a household she was admirable, she observed every member of it with anxious care, and with that clear-sighted

sympathy that makes the truest justice always silent, and always observing—she laid her plans and hopes for all. Since an accident some years ago she had been very lame, that rendered her less able to get about to her duties, but she was sharp and cheerful still.

Amy was not entirely one with her mother, though she loved and admired her; the shy, sweet-tempered child had parts of her disposition that she concealed from those keen eyes as best she could. More retiring, more imaginative, with quicker fancies and deeper thoughts, she was not so fitted in all things to cope with the world.

Some advantages she had, however, that her mother could not possess; her shy, dreaming life was not without its pleasures too. The remembrance of the green lanes in the country, down which she used to ride with the children in a cart, kept a fresh delight within her mind; and in silent moments the sound of the sea would keep rising in her ears. She had been lately confirmed, and the whole earth seemed touched with a new and spiritual sense, before which she trembled with feelings that were too young and vague for any expression yet. And at nights, kneeling by her

bed, with her young face bent down upon her hands, she looked indeed a fair and gentle representative of those young souls who, having little knowledge or help for the sin and suffering within the world, yet surely are themselves, even in the ignorance of, their innocence, a part of that 'kingdom' for which they pray.

Only in the daylight it was very hard not to get cross and tired at times.

Such, then, was Amy's life, and such was Amy's home at the time when a letter arriving from Mr Grimson, who had been a friend of old, brought Lady Farnim's proposal before her parents' minds. The mother received it in the morning, but she said not a word of what she had read until the night had come.

CHAPTER II

‘Tom,’ said Mrs Merse that evening

They were alone together in the little room that belonged especially to him. The children (under which name all the family were still included) had been all sent off to bed, and the mother and father were alone. She was seated by the little fire, for the June evening was cold, with a pile of stockings on her knee; he was leaning upon the table at a little distance, turning over a newspaper with a wearied attention on his face. With the same tired manner, for

he had got through a hard day, he raised his face towards her as she spoke.

‘Put that thing down, do, Tom, and come and talk to me.’

Dr Merse rose obediently, and let his long limbs sink into the armchair by the fireside that belonged of right to him. He was a tall, thin, delicate featured man, not yet forty-six, though his hands were thin and worn and his dark hair was streaked with gray. The trials of life, a runaway match, a precarious income, and a dozen children, had pressed heavily upon him, but at least there was no trace of fretfulness upon his face.

He leant back sideways in his armchair, with his legs crossed, his eyes on the fire, and one hand beneath his chin, whilst his wife, with her bright eyes shining out of a withered careworn face, kept on darning with the quick fingers that had no time to rest. She had on her big thimble, the stockings were on her knee; on a lower chair by her side were her big work-basket and scissors, and the housekeeping keys that were always close by her where she was.

So they remained without looking at each other, and kept silence for a while.

'I have had a letter to-day, Tom,' she said then. And he turned his face in his tired manner towards her, but without speaking still.

'It was about—about Amy. I have been thinking all day that it will be a good thing for her to be able—to leave her home.'

'*What!*' cried Dr Merse, starting upright now, with that sudden change of expression peculiar to himself, which, even in these his careworn years, could look like a re-awakening of his youth.

He had a manner delicate and gentle as his face, as his patients knew, and his care for their sufferings had given him more sympathy with the outer world than his wife possessed; but at the same time, and perhaps for the very reason that these things absorbed him so much, he did not pay so much attention as she did to all that passed within their home. Now and then, indeed, he did interfere, but she was generally able to maintain her dominion even then.

She went on darning still, glancing up at him at intervals. Whilst she spoke she had a little distinct voice that suited very well with her face and form, but she was obliged to pause now and then, partly perhaps because she could only look at him when she was drawing her needle through. The fire-light shone on her with a pretty changing radiance that was not much brighter than the dark keen smallness of her eyes.

‘It is very good-natured indeed of Mr Grimson to give this chance to us,’ she said. ‘And it will be a capital thing for Amy—to have a place—and go out and see the world. The money even—though one can’t think only of that. What is the matter with you, Tom?’

For Tom had ruffled up his hair upon his forehead with his hands, till he looked like a disordered and altogether bewildered bird. His words came with a sort of gasp that yet strove for dignity and resolution too.

‘A place—money—Amy away from home! My dear Susan, I can’t think what you mean by this at all.’

‘I mean to let Amy become Lady Farnim’s companion,’ said Mrs Merse, dropping her hands

upon her lap, or rather on the stockings, with a momentary decision that in the next instant had to give place to the unceasing work again. Her husband sat with idle hands and stared at her.

'My dear Susan, I think you must be dreaming. A child like that!'

'My dear Tom, you have never any eyes for anything that goes on at home. Amy is eighteen. I was younger when I was married.'

'But I suppose you are not thinking of her being married just yet at any rate?'

'I don't know.'

There was a little silence whilst the quick needle travelled on its unceasing journey still. But they were tired hands that held it, and it was a tired face that lent over it.

Dr Merse sat bent forward with his arms on his knees and observed it closely for a while.

'You seem to have a great deal always to do now, Susan,' he said, with the little motion of his under-lip that produced the most sarcastic tone that could ever be heard from him. Mrs Merse kept her face bent over her darning, and made no reply to that.

'Amy helps with your sewing, doesn't she? How will you manage for that when she is gone?'

'I shall do it all myself, I suppose.'

'Amy teaches the children, I think. How will you get on with that?'

'I suppose I shall do that myself.'

'That is simple madness. You shall not dispose of the only working member of the household besides yourself. You are quite young still, and there is no need for you to have many wrinkles yet.'

Mrs Merse waited to cut her darning-cotton, to give a little weary sigh, and to pause for a moment with her hand in the stocking, to consider the darn that had been done. Then she spoke.

'My dear Tom, if one of the two of us is to be spared from wrinkles, do you not think it had much better be Amy's pretty face than mine?'

'You may think so if you please, I suppose, but I do not.'

'I want her to have a happy life, poor child,' said Mrs Merse taking up another stocking, as she spoke. 'I should like her to have easy times, and to find pleasant companions for a while. She will never be young again. Her next sister is four

years younger, and very awkward ; but I daresay in time I can learn to make something out of Jane.

‘It has always seemed wrong to me,’ she went on slowly, ‘that idea that the eldest sister must do so much at home. There are cases when it must make home so hard to bear ; I think I would work a good deal to save my child from that. I want her to have a little youth ; if she is poor she will end by finding life quite hard enough at last.’

Again silence, and then Dr Merse spoke without looking up, and in that inward tone that gives a biting force to words :

‘You chose a poor life for yourself once.’

‘But she has not been allowed to choose’—a little silence—‘and I have had you through all these years.’

Their eyes met across the rug with that older affection that needs no caresses to complete it. And then when that pause was over she spoke again.

‘Oh, Tom, does it never seem hard to you that our children should have so much to bear for us, that they should grow up in so few rooms, and be so poor, and find life so rough for them ? I never thought much of that in those days

when—when we thought it was a fine thing to be poor if only we could be poor together.’

And again, after a pause, ‘It is when one’s children grow up—one feels it then. I have had you. It has made no difference to me.’

‘If you feel like that, Susan,’ he whispered, with his eyes cast down, and with a little trembling in his tone, for in all the years that they had been together they had never spoken words like these before, ‘if it affects you in this way I can only say, Settle matters as you like for Amy, and do the best for her happiness you can. But for my own part I must add—if ever the time comes for Amy to have such a choice as you had once I should wish her to choose like you.’

‘Let her choose, then,’ said Mrs Merse, folding her work upon her knee, ‘I have no wish or power even if I had to hinder that. Only let her have some fun now at anyrate whilst she can. I should like her to be able to say in aftertimes, I have been young. There is some good in that.’

She folded her work, and arranged it in the basket, and got up and put on the table the basket and the keys. There was a concluding

manner in her arrangements that allowed no more room for words. But as she passed her husband in leaving the room she stopped for an instant and touched his shoulder with her hand. It was a very little touch, but he looked up with his bright glance and their eyes met, and then she went out of the room.

Even then, tired as she was, she did not go to her own room, there was something else that claimed her attention still. Slowly, and with weary pain, she dragged her lame footsteps up the stairs. Before one door she paused, there was no sound within—she opened it softly and entered.

She set down the candle on the drawers, but there seemed no fear that its light would disturb the sleepers. The two little hard beds were side by side, Amy slept in the one that was nearest to herself. It was over that one that the mother bent with a pain that she had not known before within her heart.

Oh, how fast she was asleep, how softly her breathing came, how soft like a child's was the outline of the cheek against the pillow. Her pretty Amy—so young still, always so good to her—and she must go away from home. And

she would not come back the same, she would be older, and some man might love her, and she would have other interests and occupations now. And she would never know, never, how much her mother had cared for her, her mother who was so cross and quick with her, and said sharp things as they went about their daily toil, and was never able to make the best even of her love. Two large tears gathered in Mrs Merse's eyes; hastily, lest those tears should fall on the young face, she stooped and kissed her child. And then, very softly, for fear of disturbing the sleepers, she took up her candle and went.

Amy lay still, with her hair falling round her on the pillow, and her breathing came softly as before.

Oh, if in the weakness of our humanity we are tempted to think too often of the hard and bitter things that are said of us behind our backs, of cruel smiles and jests, of faithless words uttered even by the lips of those we love, there is one thought that may console us still. There are loving looks that never reach us, longings towards us of which we are not even conscious, brave words spoken in our defence that never touch

our ears at all. Perhaps some day in the far future it may be that these will meet us—when the rest are forgotten.

The next morning it was known by all the family that Amy would leave her home.

It may be imagined what excitement was caused by this news in a household in which domestic news was rare, and which knew no other disturbances than those caused by trips to the seaside or the country, or papa's illness, or the general gloom that surrounded Christmas bills. The little ones ran up and down the stairs, telling the new knowledge to everyone they met, and fourteen-years-old Jane loitered about with her mouth open and her eyes blank and staring, whilst Tommie, having been taught by rote that 'Amy's going,' repeated the knowledge in a continual chant to all who cared to hear. As for Amy, since that moment when she had been called apart after breakfast into her mother's room, there had risen a new expression on her face, a surprised, graver, more wistful and yet more troubled look, with a flush like that of an opening rosebud on which the sun has been resting. It was all very wonderful, she had not expected it, she could not under-

stand it still. She was glad, of course she was glad, but yet she trembled too.

And indeed, to those who had known (though none did know) the capacity for troubled thought that the poor silent child possessed, it might have seemed a question whether it was entirely safe for her, to be set suddenly free from her childish fancies and forced out into the realities of life. And yet that change is one that must come to all in time.

Mr Grimson's letters at least took no account of the evil that is to be found within the world. He spoke in rapturous terms of the position he had provided, described the estate of Landene in glowing colours, and seemed to be really pleased with this little friendly office he had done. An old sentimental acquaintance, dating from long ago, with Mrs Merse, had no doubt its influence on him—and perhaps at the same time he was not sorry to be able to secure for a dubious position a young lady whose history he knew. His accounts were found entirely satisfactory. Some few words indeed his letters dropped concerning the fact that Lord Farnim was at present away from home, but no one paid any heed at all to that.

It may be thought strange here that none of the Merse family should have read the story of an inquest with which the papers had been so much concerned less than a year before, but it is a melancholy fact that they had been long obliged to give up the luxury of a newspaper, and had ceased to interest themselves in the politics or the scandal of their land. Indeed there is not much time left for these things in a home where there is much darning and patching to be done. No doubt Dr Merse had heard all the truth at the time, and much more than the truth besides, but he was an absent-minded man, absorbed in his patients, and general news had small effect on him.

Amy was going then. The whole household was upset, disturbed, turned upside down, thrown into a confusion that is scarcely in words to be described. There were dresses to be ordered, last visits to be paid, arrangements about the journey to be made. Even the old woman at the corner must have some parting present, and the cook and the nursemaid must be both remembered too. Everyone talked, suggested, bustled, there seemed to be scarcely any possibility

of returning to peaceful ways again. As for the poor child herself, she moved about in a dream, and had ceased to have any understanding of her life.

Then relations came. There were indeed not many of these, for the runaway match of long ago had made a separation that had continued since; but there were the second cousins that lived a few streets away, and aunt Catherine who was nearer to their home, and with her Julia who had just returned from Paris, and Jack who was recruiting himself from college with the 'Long.' The second cousins, who were poor themselves, were on the whole jealous, and thought their girls should be remembered too. Aunt Catherine shook out her watered silk, and surveying the miserable and blushing Amy through spectacles, gave it out as her opinion that no fashionable lady would be satisfied with so unformed a child. Julia wondered in private how the poor dear thing would ever get clothes enough to wear. Jack, who considered his young cousin 'rather a nice sort of girl, you know,' took more active interest in her position. He was an undergraduate of an aspiring disposition, which could

only find a vent at that time in the most brilliant ties and the very largest checks.

It was from this young gentleman, from whom no one was accustomed to expect any knowledge that had not to do with horses or with dogs, who was offended because he was not allowed to smoke in the house, and spent most of his time upon the sofa in the drawing-room—it was from this very unexpected quarter that some equally unexpected information and action came.

‘I say, Ju,’ he announced one day, as he lounged upon the cushions in that exhaustion that seems a natural consequence of idleness, ‘I wonder if this place where Amy’s going has anything to do with the Lord Farnim Frank Mannian used to know? He wants an agent, they say. Crickey! wouldn’t it be fun to get Frank and Amy there together.’

Julia did not know Mr Mannian and paid no attention at all to this remark. But the idea had entered into her brother’s idle head, and would not dispose of itself so soon as she could have wished.

‘Amy will be awfully dull down there,’ he said, laying himself on his back and burying his heels in cushions as he spoke, ‘all alone with a new-married couple, a-spooning and a-

cooing, and only wanting their own sweet company for several months to come. It would really be a charity to send down to her a handsome chap like that. I'll set him on to it, Ju, for twopence, if it was only for the fun of seeing what would come. Look here, I'll shy this cushion at the dog,' and he did so.

No more was said. Miss Julia certainly did not supply the twopence, and the subject was not alluded to again. But the foolish idea had really taken hold of Jack's idle head, and before many days had passed he had put himself to the unusual exertion of writing an epistle to his friend.

Strange indeed it is to think out of what secret numberless threads the influences that guide our lives are woven. Minna, alone in her prison-house, had no thought or fancy of the undergraduate in the check suit, in the midst of London life. And yet without her knowledge or consent this attempt that might end perhaps in meaning something for her life was made. Heedlessly done, indeed, but in life there are so many heedless steps that lead to consequences still.

Frank Mannian received the letter that had been written to him on a sweet June evening, when the birds were singing in the garden of the Vicarage. He had been loitering about in the hall, prepared to go out into the grounds, when he saw the letter lying on the table by his whip. And after the first few glances he crushed it up in his hand and went upstairs with it into his room that he might think.

CHAPTER III

IT was a pleasant place enough for meditation, Frank Mannian's room, especially now when the light of the summer evening was within it, and upon the bed on which he threw himself at once. Possibly he was inclined to wait a little and enjoy himself before his meditation should begin. We too having crossed the threshold of another home, may doubtless be permitted to linger in the light of that summer evening for a while.

Down below the gabled window was the Vicarage garden, bright now with roses and geraniums,

and masses of white pinks in dark corners, and blue larkspurs rearing tall heads against the fence. It was a small latticed window, opening down the middle, and able to be thrown back on each side, so as to let in the summer air in as unlimited a manner as its size would allow. Honeysuckle was round it, making sweet incense there at night, and below the red rose tree that grew on the gray Vicarage walls bestowed its wealth of flowers, just far enough below for Frank to have risked his neck often in desperate attempts to catch hold of blossoms that were just beyond his reach.

Then far away, though close and homelike still, the wide country with the evening light upon it stretched onwards to the sky—wide and flat, and yet not without its little ups and downs in which cottages could nestle, and its groups of trees and tall hedges, with great fields that grew gray at last against the meeting grayness of the low hills and of the sky. Frank knew the scene by heart, cottages, distances and trees, he had grown up in the midst of it, and of all the scenes of the earth, this remained the one the most preferred by him. He looked a good specimen of young, bright manhood as he knelt by the window-seat at last, with

the letter open upon it, the evening wind stirring his hair, and his hands clasped in resolved meditation at the back of his head. It was curly hair that the wind stirred, dark and active in look, and matching well with the young flat back and shoulders, and the vigour of the young arms that he had raised. The face that he had turned towards the distant country was young as well, with untamed brightness of resolution in the dark blue eyes, and something of boyish audacity in the young lips that a man's moustache concealed. A bright face—with eager health and quick intelligence, and the look on it of cricket rather than of study, the face of one on whom life had not been hard as yet.

And yet Frank had after all known very little of the softness of life. His boyhood had been reared in a home that was not rich, he had grown up without any companions of his own age, without any mother, alone with two older men who were not disposed to waste much spoiling care on him. The house that echoed to his quick footsteps or eager whistling would, but for these things, have been almost entirely silent; in those rooms which he most frequented he sat and made his flies for

fishing, or cut up wadding for cartridges alone. Nor was that solitude of amusement in the least more dull than the invalid chamber in which his uncle lived, or the study in which his father read and wrote—in both which rooms he was a not too much welcomed visitor at times. It might have been quite possible to him to find the years depressing—only that there is a young delight in health and in existence that requires very little to support its life.

And yet in spite of that it had been true that in the last year more real vexations had come; it is perhaps impossible for twenty-three summers to have entirely escaped the trials and cares of the world. His father had lost money, and the pressure of poverty was beginning now at last to be felt within his home. His uncle's invalid life was becoming more exacting in its strain both on himself and on others. Then he himself, since his college career had been completed, had been on the lookout for work. It had seemed impossible that he should not find something to do, the world has so many employments, and he felt himself capable of much. But month after month passed by

and the world seemed in no need of him, and his father had no money with which to assist him, and yet the need that he should be earning his own livelihood remained. As scheme after scheme was considered and thrown aside, and the months still passed on, leaving him in idleness, he began to feel something of the 'hope deferred' that makes the heart grow sick at last.

And meanwhile the days passed on at home in a slow monotony that might have been found very hard to bear by a nature less buoyant than his own.

His father, the Rev. James Mannian, had now been vicar of the parish in which he lived for nearly thirty years. It was a pretty parish, lying in quiet lanes and fields, with a pleasant stillness round its red or thatched roofs, and round the low wall of the churchyard, and the gray tower of the church amongst the trees. The gray walls and red roses of the Vicarage were charming too, and the old-fashioned garden seemed made for solitude and dreams. If only the ideal residence could ensure the fact of an ideal peace as well.

The life of Mr Mannian had been one of those unnoticed tragedies that a careful search might discover amongst the lanes as amongst the cities of the world. He was a man of scrupulous and sensitive nature, a scholar and a bookworm, a careful though not a genial clergyman and in some degree a naturalist and a geologist as well. All these things have in themselves nothing inconsistent with enjoyment; but the bent stooping figure, and the fine lines of his worn and troubled face had not much of joy to tell.

Frank was used to his father's melancholy, to his silence, and to the objections that were frequently made in his boyhood to any noisy laughter or movements from himself. He had grown up to these things, and did not think of inquiring into them, any more than he thought of asking why his father sat all day amongst his books or why the chair in the study was lined with dark red leather, and had old brass nails as studs. Nevertheless all suffering must own its causes, though the troubled pain that has become a part of our existence is no longer a matter of questioning with us. When Mr Mannian did at all look back into the past—which was not often—he seemed

to feel the burn and darkness of the fever that had left a dim pain and confusion in his brain, but the reality of his depression owned a longer date and a more persistent doubt than that.

In his early life he had been tempted to an action of which his mind and conscience disapproved; and though the sin was one that would scarce have weighed at all upon the soul of another, the remembrance of it retained its influence with him. He had been as a young man sensitive, reserved, and sceptical, given to doubts and arguments, prone to question and not very willing to believe. These feelings, restrained by a timid and proud nature he kept carefully concealed from all his relations at home, resolving only that no sort of inducement, and not even the temptation of a family living should induce him to enter the profession that his father had chosen for him. A more subtle temptation, however, than he had expected assailed him, he found that his marriage depended on his choice, and unable to resist longer he fell into the snare at last. From that time everything prospered with him, he obtained the wife and the living he desired, and found himself at an early age comfortably settled, happily married, successful

in all things save in the one whisper which reminded him in what manner his success was won.

And then, suddenly and all at once as it seemed, there fell upon him a 'horror of great darkness.' Light seemed to be withdrawn from him, and help; he found himself alone, perjured, despised in his own eyes, and cast out and far away from God. In the agony of that conflict his doubts were swept away; he was beset by the faith he had despised, face to face with the condemnation he had doubted. He hated the parish in which he was compelled to labour, the home in which his first bridal days had been spent, the loving affection that seemed like an accusation at his side. The days and months passed on, the conflict raged like madness in his soul, and he attended to his duties as before. The parish was large and neglected, and he dared not give up his work; he dared not attempt even the comfort of confession to the wife over whose delicate health he watched by night and day; the outward prosperity was a mockery; there seemed no peace, and there was no rest for him. It was even in some respects a relief when the blow that had been long dreaded came down on him at last, and his wife

lay dead within his arms. The months that followed this crowning blow, however, were more than his already failing strength could bear ; a fever seized him, he had inflammation of the brain, and recovered at last a life too physically and mentally shattered to regain its strength again.

When we read of such tempests it seems a natural consequence that the souls that have been driven by them should sink beneath the darkness that has overwhelmed them. But it is not so in life. Since that time of which he dared not think, day had succeeded day with Mr Mannian for more than twenty years ; he had gone out day after day into his fields and village streets, had preached and studied and baptized ; the same great Bible rested on his study-table, the same bowl of bread and milk came up nightly for the evening meal that he now always ate alone. He had grown older, quieter, mildly cynical in spirit, not disposed to place too much confidence in others, getting through his work quietly, and spending always much of his time alone. But that weight of dim depression rested upon him still, a silent companion that he made no effort to remove.

Some other changes indeed the years had

brought, as month after month made fresh alterations in the young life that grew up by his side. But Mr Mannian had never paid much attention to his son. In that first year that succeeded his wife's death he had been too ill himself and too overwhelmed to care. With these feelings had mingled a strange sort of superstitious dread, he would not set his affections too strongly on this last remaining link, lest this also should be removed. As years went on, and the sense of duty began to assume its place amidst the trouble and confusion of his mind, some ideas of training and direction began to enter there. But these found their chief expression in an inward determination that the boy should not be spoilt.

Frank was not spoilt; on the contrary his education had Spartan tendencies that it needed some courage to endure. For the vicar's servants were old and feeble, and whenever any specially difficult or irksome task had to be performed, the sending of a long message, or the turning of an unruly horse out of the orchard, there was one command that had grown familiar to the house: 'Let it alone, Master Frank shall go.' Frank

had shovelled the snow off the roof on winters' evenings, and whilst still almost a child, had been summoned twice from his warm bed to fetch the doctor for his uncle, finding his way with a dark lantern through the lanes. If he had been sickly or feeble, or even easily frightened, this sort of training might not have proved the best for him. As it was he grew up straight and strong, riding in cheerfully on the hired pony to the grammar-school in the morning, and playing cricket in the holidays with the village boys, a general favourite with them all. With these out-door studies and amusements to fall back upon, he was not too much affected by the loneliness of his home.

His father he saw very little, seldom even at meals, most often when he was summoned to the study to tell how he had been getting on at school, or to receive that discipline of the rod which formed a considerable part of Mr Mannian's ideas on education. Not that, even in the father's eyes, there was much need for that in this particular instance; the boy was bright and truthful, with no grain of viciousness or temper in the thoughtless scrapes into which he fell, and of which complaints were made—but then such

chastisement formed a portion of his theory, and on whom are we to try our theories if not on the one human being that is committed to our charge? Frank, on his side, was disposed to take everything in good part, and came with almost as light foot-steps to receive the recompense of his errors as to display a prize.

Perhaps he felt his father's peculiar disposition more keenly as the years went on with him, and he was no longer able to be ignorant of the rebuffs his words received.

'So you have gained the prize, Frank! You could not have had much genius to contend against,' was a sarcasm that passed very lightly over youthful ears, but the mildly surprised, 'Do you call this a picture?' proved a cruel blow to artistic tendencies in later life. Frank learnt that he must be silent with his father, and though his temper was too sweet to gain any bitterness in consequence, he learnt a reserve that would not otherwise have been natural to him.

There is one other individual in the small household who deserves a description—that is the gentleman whom Frank had known from

his earliest years by the name of Uncle Sarby. About a year after Mrs Mannian's death, Uncle Sarby, who was a brother of her mother, had arrived at the Vicarage in a very broken-down and almost dying condition, and, from that time forth had taken up his abode there. He was an old invalid of a bachelor, reputed to be enormously rich, unpleasing in appearance, cross-grained in temper, and very eccentric in his ways. It might be supposed, therefore, that his continued stay would form a good subject for condolences, but the wisdom of the world looks below the surface of events, and friends shook their heads and whispered that the Mannians would make a good thing out of it no doubt. That remained to be proved. At present, since the permanent visitor only provided his own servant and his own luxuries, and seemed to consider that the house and all it contained was at his entire disposal on these easy terms, it might perhaps more truthfully be asserted that he had made a good thing out of them.

Of course the time might still come when this kindness would be more than liberally repaid; but, in spite of all the wisdom of his friends,

it must not be supposed that any thought of testamentary wealth was the uppermost motive in Mr Mannian's mind. His delicate generosity had rendered him unable to refuse shelter to a relation who was in need of help, and amongst the many refinements of his disposition was one which made it impossible to him, even in these years of growing poverty, to insist upon payment for that which had originally been offered as a gift.

So the little household lived together in the gray Vicarage, the old servants, the old invalid, the broken-down clergyman, and the young life that seemed a contradiction to them all. The days went on very quietly and evenly with them.

It had been in many respects a good thing for Frank that his education had been completed before the more pressing years of his father's poverty began. He had been in a small grammar school near home, and then to a public school, and then to college, from all which places he had returned without having made any special display of industry or talent, but at any rate, though much older in experience, with the same look of fresh youthfulness about

him as before. His religious training would have been even more scanty than that which falls to the usual share of boys who have no mothers, had not his father taken up the idea of sending him to the Sunday School with the village boys, to which place he continued to return during his holidays, as long as its laws, which had certain limits as to age, would permit. He was given a large hymn-book as a prize when at last he left.

Mr Mannian was never accustomed to speak of his deepest feelings, and his son gained very little moral or religious instruction in words from him. One sentence indeed Frank remembered spoken on that last Sunday evening before for the first time he had left his home, when he was allowed for once to come and sit in the study on a footstool at his father's knee, almost as much alarmed at that unwonted privilege as at the new life that rose close before him then. He had sat very quiet, holding himself still and trying to read through all the evening, when some instinct made him raise his face suddenly and he saw that his father's eyes were fixed on him. Then Mr Mannian bent all at once towards him, and put his hands on his

shoulders, with some sudden strange emotion in his face.

‘Try and keep yourself innocent, Frank. Your mother will like that.’

Frank did not forget those words, though his boy’s mind could not understand much of their meaning at the time. One other sentence of instruction, though one only, was bestowed on him by his father, that was on the day he left his home to go to Oxford—the last words as they stood together by the dog-cart at the door,

‘Remember, Frank, if you get into debts that I have no money to pay them.’

It was a short code, and spoken in short abrupt words, but it carried its meaning too. Frank’s career at college was not brilliant, as I have said; but in spite of all the temptations that beset a general favourite he kept scrupulously clear of all but the most necessary expenses.

And now he had returned, and for a whole year had been a living, eating, idle expense on his father’s hands, trying in vain to discover some suitable permanent employment to which to devote his life. That search for work had become rather wearing after the first few months

had passed. Nevertheless he did not yet despair. Twenty-three summers, a bright youth, a strong health—these things are not easily overwhelmed. He had only become a little tired of hope.

And now he knelt by the window in the sweet June evening, with his arms crossed behind his dark curly head, the Vicarage garden beneath him, and the letter open before him on the sill.

CHAPTER IV

‘LORD FARNIM!—hum’—meditated Frank, ‘I wonder what made him think of me—wait a minute—I think I remember mentioning him in the last letter I ever wrote to Jack, yes, indeed I did. Now why did I do that?—Wait another minute, I may arrive at it all at last.’

He did wait a minute, leaning his arms on the wide window-seat, whilst the honeysuckle from beneath raised its sweet heads to him.

‘Uncle—Uncle Sarby—ha, hum, I think I am getting to it now—Now what was it he said

to me all these weeks ago?—Something about a marriage, I can't quite remember now, I think he said Lord Farnim had married a pretty woman he had picked up in a gambling house—he seemed much interested in that. It seems a rum thing to have done, now I think of it, but I suppose his lordship knows his own affairs—

‘And so I suppose, at least I think, that it must have been that which has put his name into my head, and that I said something to Jack about having met him when I was writing about those old holidays in France. And then that put it all into Jack's head, I suppose, and so when *he* met him. I wonder how it comes about that my very distant cousin is such friends with Jack!’

Again silence whilst the honeysuckle flowers raised their heads and perfume together, and evening lights and shadows fell softly upon the garden below. The letter lay open on the window-seat, and Frank lowered his eyes to its contents again.

‘And he was jolly altogether,’ so it said, ‘and condescended to ask a great many things of you. He said he was looking out for someone to act as his agent, for he would have to be abroad so

much, and that if you could come down to him on the 28th of June he would be glad to see if you could suit. He asked me to mention it because he had no time to write himself and was going abroad again as soon as the 29th came, and you must come by the five o'clock train to Landene if you can come at all, he said, because he will be away for a good part of the day.

Jack had thrown in this last remark that he might ensure the fact of Frank and Amy arriving together.

'He can put you up for the night and all that sort of thing,' the letter said, 'if you can only contrive at all to be there. I really would, you know, if I were you. Of course, I gave you the best of characters, old boy, wise beyond your years, you know, and all that sort of thing. It really might prove to be a sort of an opening. I don't think there's many friends who would take such pains for you.'

'There is an awfully pretty girl down in Cheshire where I was staying'—

'Hang it, he is always writing about his pretty girls,' said Frank, 'I get so bored with him.'

And then he fell to meditation, clasping his

hands at the back of his hair once more. This new proposal had certainly something fascinating in its suddenness; the house at Landene of which he had heard, the new employment that might really perhaps mean something for him, the lovely bride of whom such strange stories were told, all these things had charms. Something there was in him at the same time that rebelled against this easy invitation that had not been given by the owner of the house, for he had not a little of the easily stirred pride of his father in his disposition—but then in matters of business it is absurd to stand upon your dignity too much. If he met with a cold reception—but, after all, would it much hurt him if he did?

So his thoughts went, moving up and down, as the evening air stirred the flowers and leaves below. One indeed there was that never occurred to him—that was that the invitation that he debated over accepting might not have been bestowed on him at all, it never entered his fancy for one moment to think of that. Frank knew Jack Merse of old, and was accustomed to consider him rather an empty-headed sort of fellow, it did not occur to him to remember that the most

limited imagination may be capable of so small a contrivance as a hoax.

‘Queer sort of chap, Lord Farnim,’ he reflected, as he stirred his dark curls with his thumbs. ‘Rather a good-looking fellow, as I remember him, and solemnish, with a jaw that looked as if he might be ugly to deal with at times. Well, at any rate this seems kind enough of him—hallo, come in there!’

‘Your uncle’s dinner, sir, is waiting.’

‘Hang it,’ said Frank, ‘and I had forgotten he had invited me—well, get back quickly, and say I will come when I can.’ Then to himself as the door closed again, ‘He will have to do without my evening coat this time.’

He did linger a few minutes, not to put on his evening coat, but to consider whether or not he should tell his great uncle of the offer he had received. A strong impulse prompted him to be silent, though he could scarcely tell from what reason this inclination came. Uncle Sarby seemed to be acquainted with Lord Farnim’s affairs, seemed even to be excited about them, and might perhaps be able to offer good advice on the occasion, but then——

'He likes to meddle in my business if I give him the smallest excuse for doing so,' said Frank. 'I should like to keep his crooked head out of anything I am concerned in if I can. He is a deal too fond of schemes and interference, I never find out that I get much good from him, and, besides, it is for my father to decide.'

So for this filial reason, and for the reason too of that impulse for which he could not account, he decided on silence after all. Perhaps the main motive that guided him was one that prompts many of us on such occasions in our lives. When we have made up our minds to the course we are about to pursue we are not too eager for advice.

* * * * *

The sweet June evening sunlight lingered still without, but blinds were drawn and candles were lit already in Uncle Sarby's room. For some years past the invalid had decided that the air of evening might do some harm to him.

He sat now in his great arm-chair with his feet upon a footstool and his cut glass and silver on the table in front of him, whilst Frank in his dark gray morning suit looked even younger than usual

by his side. Dinner had given place to dessert, but the drinking of wine had for some minutes been over for them both.

The great uncle had been more amiable than usual, for he had taken no notice at all of his young companion's dress; but this seemed to be because he was himself so much absorbed in thought. He sat in the carved high-backed chair, that made a dark-red background to his face and figure, and leant his face upon his hand, and after one or two sharp intervals of speech, fell into a silence that became complete at last. That was not ordinary conduct with him, though his words never came too continuously, but his mind seemed occupied to-night.

Certainly it was no wonder that his companion looked still more youthful by his side. Imagine for one instant—a small, shrivelled, bent, yellow mummy of a being, with a few scattered gray hairs only on his head, with a face so short that it looked as if it had been squeezed, little unpleasing eyes, that had the gift of seeming to disappear at times into his head, and a most enormous mouth, scantily furnished with yellow teeth, that seemed to have swallowed his other features, and from

which proceeded at times, instead of the large hoarseness that might have been expected, a very small and intensely spiteful voice. That was the old age of Uncle Sarby—not much altered since Frank Mannian's first memories of it, more than twenty years before. Perhaps it had not been able altogether to teach him the veneration that is due to age from youth—he had learnt to think of his great uncle as of a thing that must be endured, and that was all.

Such as they were, however, they sat together now, with emptied wine-glasses and emptied strawberry plates in front of them, and kept silence as if each of them had been alone. Frank had made conversation by hard efforts through all the dinner, but finding his services no longer required, he let his head drop, and fell back once more into meditation now. If Lord Farnim really wanted——

‘Are you asleep, sir?’

He raised his eyes, and saw that Uncle Sarby's glance was fixed on him. The invalid had raised himself on his cushions, and a little quivering motion stirred his bent shoulders—undoubtedly

some agitation or excitement was to be expected now.

‘I ask you to my dinner, sir,’ said the little bitter voice that had become sharp and querulous now with years. ‘I give you a better meal than you would have had, besides, in the house, and I expect you, in return, to show at least the ordinary civility that even a country parson’s son may be expected to possess. If these are the manners in which your father has educated you, you need scarcely expect to be received into society at all.’

There was a little silence.

‘I beg your pardon, sir, if I have offended you,’ said Frank, then raising his dark blue glance, with a humility more apparent in his manner than his words. ‘But if you will allow me, you are mistaken in one point at least. I cannot sleep at a dinner table. I often wish I could.’

‘And what do you mean by that, sir?’ the sharpness of the small eyes demanded with even more distinctness than the voice.

‘I don’t know,’ said Frank, ‘I cannot always discover my own meanings; but I know they

are there if one only knew how to look for them.'

'I suppose you intend that for wit,' said Uncle Sarby. 'In these days every ignorant blockhead thinks that all his impertinence is wit.'

'Well, poor fellows,' said Frank, 'it is surely best for them. No doubt they will get dull enough—in time.'

Again there was silence.

'Look you here, Frank,' said uncle Sarby, 'we have had enough of this.'

His voice, sharp as it was, had changed in expression now. Frank raised his eyes in surprise, but said nothing.

'I have sent for you because I wish to talk to you, and I intend to talk to you, and we will have no more of this. Consider yourself very clever if you like, it makes no difference to me. And now, if you want no more wine, we will come and sit down by the fire and I will speak to you.'

They sat down opposite to each other by the low fire in easy-chairs, Frank wondering still. But first the invalid uncle required his nephew's hands to support him on to his cushions and then to fetch the footstool for him, and then to arrange a plaid

shawl over his knees. When these little services, for which he never gave any thanks, were done, he was exhausted enough to be only able to lean back against his cushions, a yellow panting image, and to remain in silence for a while. Frank, on his part, was falling back into meditation again, though after his recent reproof he preserved enough of his senses to know when the sharp narrow glance was fixed on him once more.

‘Frank!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Attend to me for an instant, if you please. I shall not speak to you in this manner again. You are over twenty now and you have finished your education and that sort of foolery. What are you intending to do now with yourself?’

Frank looked down upon his crossed legs and was silent.

‘You have not done too well, so far,’ said the little sharp voice. ‘I wonder now if you consider that you have any prospects to give yourself airs upon at all.’

Still silence

‘Perhaps you have been in the habit of thinking that you can make some prospects out of *me*?’

‘When I boast of those,’ said Frank, raising his eyes slightly, ‘you will have more right to remind me of them.’

‘You think you have them, then?’

A little pause, and then Frank, with a sudden movement, shook back the curly darkness of his head. ‘Well, hang it,’ he said, whilst his blue eyes laughed, ‘you might be doing something for me, you know.’

If his father’s pride had dictated his first remark, the second seemed more in character with himself. But these quick changes into merriment only belonged to the uppermost part of his nature after all.

Uncle Sarby looked at him with the narrowing glance that seemed to send *his* eyes backwards into his head. He spoke in a very small whisper that was not without its sting, ‘And what have you been in the habit then, if I may ask, of expecting from me?’

‘Oh—nothing.’

‘Indeed.’

‘Oh—a lot of good advice,’ said Frank. ‘Whenever I feel too cheerful about myself, I am glad I have an uncle in the house.’ Again silence.

‘And what do you expect from me then?’ asked Uncle Sarby, whilst his narrow glance became more intense and more contracted still.

Frank was surprised and wounded. In spite of himself he could not keep a deep flush from mounting in his face, and he hung his head in a manner not usual with him as he replied in a low voice, ‘My father has brought me up to depend upon myself.’

‘And what sort of a dependence do you call that, young gentleman?’ whispered Uncle Sarby then.

‘Oh, not much better than some others, perhaps.’ And then he laughed.

Frank had a happy audacity that had before now proved of service to him in these *tête-a-tête* meals which his father compelled him to endure. Already his boyish spirits, depressed for a moment, were rising to his assistance. But again there was a pause.

Uncle Sarby leant back fidgeting amongst his wraps and cushions, and fingering some paper that could be scarcely seen in the thin yellow fingers that closed round it their nervous grasp. Some strong, almost overmastering impulse, seemed indeed

to be moving him, which the weakness of age and illness left him scarcely strength enough to contend with or express; there came painful and changing wrinkles in his face, and his yellow eyelids drooped as if some weight were pressing on them, whilst his breath came in little pants between his lips. After a while he regained his strength and spoke. Frank was long used to these pauses and had fallen back to the consideration of his own affairs again.

‘You talk of yourself,’ whispered uncle Sarby, ‘as if you had some hope or chance in life. You have no money, or talents, and not much head piece with which to make your way. You have been brought up to be idle. I don’t know what you are fit for—And if you had the money you wouldn’t know what the devil to do with it. I know you wouldn’t. You have no spirit in you, even for a parson’s son, your father might just as well have had a girl upon his hands at once.’

‘Thank you with all my heart for your good opinion of me, sir,’ said Frank. ‘I am not accustomed to go to the devil for instruction yet. And as for being like a girl—it’s a great compliment no doubt, and of course it must be true since you

say it, but I think if any fellow of my own age was to make that observation he would find I could hit out pretty tolerable straight in spite of that.'

'And that is quite enough to be proud of, I suppose,' his uncle whispered. 'Every fool of the present day is contented if he has more back than brains.' And then after a moment's pause, and with abruptness in spite of the lowness with which the panting words were compelled to come,

'There is only one thing of any sort that I can think of for you.'

Frank looked up in a surprise that seemed at once to quicken and to hold his breath, whilst his heart beat faster as before the sense of unexpected tidings. This persistent interest in his affairs indeed had something in it to which he was not accustomed—but there was more than that in his mind, an almost guilty conscience whispered that he might be about to hear again of Lord Farnim's offer now. And then in that instant for reflection that was allowed him, he considered again whether it would be well to mention the letter he had received, and decided again that he had best 'keep out of that.' All

these things seemed to pass together in a moment, and then his uncle spoke once more.

‘You haven’t too much of money, or of birth, or—ugh, ugh!—or of anything else that I can see. But you have a straight nose, and you had better make the best you can of that.’

‘I hope it will lead me straight, sir,’ said Frank.

Uncle Sarby gave an inarticulate sound that was something between a snarl and a growl before he proceeded, ‘I don’t say this to make you conceited, sir, because you have already a deal too much of that. And I don’t say it to flatter, because there is no reason that I know of why I should wish for that. But if you haven’t anything to boast of but your looks it’s as well to make the best you can of them.—And there was a girl up at that ball you danced at t’other night that made a deal of you.’

A pause came.

‘Well, sir,’ said Frank then.

He was conscious of blushing deeply but there was no pleasure in the feeling. It was rather like the pain of penetrating shame, and he found it difficult to keep his head raised as he spoke. His uncle glanced covertly at him

for an instant before he went on with his words.

‘Well, sir, you know whom I mean, and it’s no good pretending that you don’t. I’ve heard a word or two about it from other people since. Mary Evans, the daughter of that foundryman at Leeds. There’s a chance for you at once. Or if you can’t get her, for she’s rolling in riches, from what they say, go after someone else and try your luck again. Go after the money. It won’t come dropping into your mouth for all that you may wish. And if you’ll do what I say—ugh, ugh!—I’ll be ready to tell you on my part what I will do for you.’

Again a pause.

‘Well, sir,’ said Frank.

‘Well, sir, I’m a man of few words, and I’m ready to tell you what I’ll do for you at once. I won’t give my cash to set you up in any employment, for I know you won’t do much at that, and I won’t maintain you in idleness, by — I won’t. And I have got nothing to leave you, whatever your expectations may have been. But I’ll give you enough to make a figure on for the next few years, and I know

to whom to introduce you, and I'll leave you to settle for yourself.'

Silence.

'Do you mean to tell me that girl wouldn't have you if you asked her—tell me that now.'

'I don't know,' said Frank, 'and I don't care.'

He had raised his face and the sharp flush of mortification had made its way even through the sunburnt colour of his forehead. His uncle glanced at him with the same keen narrowness again.

'I suppose you intend to ask her, at least,' he said.

'No, I don't,' said Frank.

There was a silence.

'I suppose you find some text forbidding—you think yourself too good a christian for that.'

Frank looked down once more before he spoke.

'As to being a christian,' he said, still keeping his eyes lowered, 'I never pretended to be too much of that, but I've been baptized, and I am not going to ask a woman for her money.'

It was one of those sudden statements in which youthful eagerness hastens to define its vague impressions into spoken words—a hastily raised landmark that may serve as a security when future

years have come. Uncle Sarby made no reply, perhaps he found it difficult to connect into sequence the disjointed words.

‘You will go on—trying to work,’ he whispered, in a low voice, after a minute or two had passed, ‘and you will find some fool like yourself—and you will marry—and you will find yourselves eating the tails of your rats after all your kitchen’s food has gone.’

‘Thanks,’ said Frank. ‘That *does* sound well; it makes quite a graphic picture of what my future life will be. But why the tail—since that can scarcely be the most savoury portion of the rat?’

His uncle paid no attention whatever to his words.

‘You do not remember what I have told you,’ he whispered at last, with something of determined insistence even in the lowness of the sound. Frank for reply gave the little backward movement of his head, with the young change of expression that could spread like light over his face.

‘Oh, yes; that I can boast of my looks if of nothing else,’ he said, ‘I have no doubt at all of that.’

His uncle made a little disdainful sound, that is not to be described in words, and fell back into silent thoughts once more. Frank took this opportunity to rise.

‘I am afraid I must be going,’ he said. ‘I want to speak to my father before he goes upstairs to-night.’

His uncle raised his face with a bewildered manner, as if he were being recalled suddenly from some all-absorbing mood, and clenched his fingers with nervous haste over the paper that they held. Frank observed it now for the first time, and observed also for the first time the peculiar expression of his face.

‘Are you sure you are not ill?’ he asked hastily.

But his question seemed to be unheard. Uncle Sarby’s head had drooped upon his breast, his words were whispered in a curious dreaming tone when at last they came.

‘You don’ know—I’ve heard more’n you know. I’ve no more money now to leave to you.’

Frank stood still, surprised and silent. There was a moment’s pause. Then the old sinking head was raised slowly, and their eyes met. Frank

never knew what impulse it was that kept trying to impel him then to speak, to tell of this new offer and of all the new hopes that he had formed. Perhaps that struggling instinct might have been even stronger than his reserve if it had not been for the curious change upon his companion's face. The yellow lips moved, there was a sort of struggle in the wrinkling forehead, and the old hands twitched nervously—then there came a change, the lips closed, and the head sank down again. On one side, and on the other, the moment for explanations had passed.

'Good-night,' said Frank 'I'll ring the bell, had I not better? for your man to come to you. I'm afraid I have been dull enough all this evening, but at any rate I have heard a great many truths about myself. I'll keep that vision of the rats tails in front of me, it will do to scare me perhaps when I am in need of fears. Thanks so much for asking me and for all your good advice. I am sure I ought to be a model. That bell has rung for once because I heard it. Good-night.'

Some sense of uneasiness made him linger for a full minute in the passage outside. The feeling

was too unwonted for him not to desire to make some vigorous effort to dispel it, he roused himself with a sort of shake, and went downstairs with quick footsteps to his father's room.

CHAPTER V

MR MANNIAN was standing alone there by the window. The June evening had grown dark, and the candles were lighted on the table, but the shutters had not yet been drawn, and the dimness of the garden lay without. He stood leaning against the shutter at the side, a solitary figure.

‘Is it you, Frank?’ he said, turning his head a little towards the intruder who had knocked and entered. ‘I generally like to be alone at this time, you know.’

‘You can spare me two minutes for once, I hope,’ said Frank, ‘I wanted to speak to you to-night.’

Mr Mannian, thus appealed to, turned slowly away from the window and sat down in a chair by the table. The light of the candles in the dimness brought into strong relief his thin delicate features and dark hair streaked with gray—he had a face with fine and subtle lines whose quiet meaning was not to be understood at once. Frank had thrown himself into a chair by his side, the two heads, seen thus together, seemed almost to form a contrast, and yet there was a curious resemblance between them all the same.

There was a little pause and then the younger man spoke with something of an effort.

‘I am thinking of going away to-morrow—for a night,’ he said. ‘Will that make any difference to you?’

Mr Mannian did not answer for a while, and there was a faint stirring of his lips like the first beginning of a sarcastic smile before he spoke.

‘You are beginning to be very submissive,’ he said. ‘Since when have you learnt to ask my permission before you come or go?’

‘I will ask your permission any time you please,’

said Frank, 'I did not know you cared for that.' He spoke in subdued tone, for he was not accustomed to retort upon his father as upon his uncle. 'Will it make any difference to you to-morrow?'

'Where are you going?'

'Lord Farnim has asked me to go down to Landene for a night.'

Again Mr Mannian did not speak for a moment, his usual manner of expressing some surprise. Then he looked again with his dark quiet glance towards his son, leaning back in his chair as he spoke. 'And how long have you been acquainted with Lord Farnim, if I may ask?'

'I have met him once. This is a matter of business. He wants someone to look after his estate.'

Again silence. Frank leant his elbows on the table by the candles, and in a rather conscious mood twisted his fingers into his hair. His father's eyes were resting on him with more attention than they usually displayed.

'To look after his estate, did you say? Does Lord Farnim know your age?'

'As well as—anyone else does,' said Frank colouring a little as he smiled.

'How old are you? I always forget.'

'Twenty-three.'

'Perhaps Lord Farnim has had his estate managed by school-boys until now.'

There was no answer until Frank said, without looking up,

'I intend to offer myself to him at any rate, if you have no objection.

'Certainly you can do as you please. Was that all you intended to ask me?'

'Yes—everything.'

Again there was silence, but Frank did not get up and go; he sat still, looking down on the table, and twisting the dark curls of his hair between his fingers. After a while his father said to break the pause,

'You have been with your uncle to-night? How was he?'

'Oh, much the same as usual. No—by the way—he went so far as to pay me a compliment for once.' He looked up now with the quick boyish change of expression that flashed like sparkling light into his eyes.

‘He told me I was very good-looking.’

Mr Mannian drew in his lips and was silent.

‘He did indeed—really now, it is true. He said my nose was straight; he said he would give me some money, and I might go out into the world and find a rich wife there for myself. He seemed to think I should find no difficulty in that.’

‘And you believe that to be true?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘What a conceited coxcomb you must be!’

‘I thought I ought to believe what my uncle said,’ replied Frank, with a little outward movement of a mouth that through all its audacity had something in it of the curious mobility of his father’s expression.

‘And you would sell yourself like the rest of the world if you only had the chance, I suppose?’

‘I wish I could have the chance, that’s all.’

‘You will find too late that there are some things that no money has the power to buy.’

‘But it can buy a good deal at anyrate,’ said Frank, throwing himself back and looking up at the ceiling, as if in a rapture of contemplation.

Mr Mannian looked towards him with his slight sarcastic expression. His face was very weary, and his next words came with the manner of one who wishes for a conversation to be closed.

‘Do as you like,’ he said. ‘I have no power to hinder you. It is getting late now, and I am very tired to-night.’

They both rose together, the clergyman with a worn, tired manner as if it were almost an effort to him to stand. He was very tall, although he was bent, as he stood now with his hand leaning on the table by the candlestick. Frank’s young straight growth rose scarcely higher than his father’s head. Some more last words he said in a tone more stern than was usual to his voice.

‘Since we are together, Frank, there is one last thing I should like to say to you. This question of employment for you is becoming far more serious than you think. I have now two farms on my hands. Since Gibson’s failure a year or two ago I have become poorer and poorer; I do not see where it is all to end at last.’

‘It seems a bad look-out indeed,’ said Frank, in cheery tones. ‘But old Randal over the water

lost a lot more than you did that time, and he seems quite jovial still. He was talking to me about his sons the other day, he says they are so clever and so industrious that he makes the greatest expectations out of them.'

There was a pause, and then Mr Mannian said very quietly,

'I am afraid I have not those expectations.'

A long silence followed. The young man had leant his hand also on the table, he stood looking down with his lips pressed together, whilst a hot colour burned his face. His father, surprised at the pause, looked again towards him after a while.

'You do not seem to have so much as usual to say for yourself to-night,' he said.

'It is best for me to be quiet, I think,' said Frank, 'when you speak to me like that.'

The smallest sign of temper or resentment was so rare with him that Mr Mannian remained silent from surprise. No more words were spoken and after a little while Frank turned round and went towards the door. It belonged to his disposition, however, to come back as soon as he reached it, and to speak in a careless tone as if he were

resuming some cheerful conversation they had dropped.

‘By the way,’ he said, ‘there is that message about the dogs I had forgotten. Would you like me to see about them before I start?’

‘You had better tell Evans,’ said Mr Mannian. ‘He knows more about those things than you do.’

‘And if there is anything else for him to do you can let me know to-morrow morning. You look tired. I hope you are not going to have another attack like you had last week. Good-night—I’ll try and fetch back a rich wife from my travels if I can.’

In this way he made peace, he could not bear to leave the room with any spoken expressions of ill-will as the last that they had said. Yet it may be that his father’s words had thrust even more deeply than he knew. He closed the door, and Mr Mannian sank down into a chair, ill, weary, in too much pain not to find it a relief to be alone. The scene that had just passed remained as a further trouble on his mind; as he leant his face upon his hands his tired brows drew together more closely over that. ‘I did not mean to vex him—but he will get over it,’ he said.

Frank, meanwhile, was kneeling also alone, by his open window, with the garden beneath, the starlight above, and the sweetness of the honey-suckles rising towards him with the night air that blew into his face. He was trying to excite himself anew with the thought of the hopes that he had raised, but the effort was more conscious than he liked; his evening had not been pleasant to him, and the sense of being held in small esteem came like jarring vibrations into all the visions he had formed. If *they* should be right after all there would not then be much chance or hope for him. And with this hurt feeling came another deeper sense that had not been touched before.

‘I never did fag very much at my work; if I had done, or if I had been born clever, he might have learnt in time to be more pleased with me.’

His face was resting against his hand as he leant upon the sill, but he withdrew it suddenly as he discovered that his eyes had filled with tears. There was something so absurd in this, and so wonderful, that he broke out into whistling of Italian airs at once. The sound was only too audible below. Mr Mannian, who had gone wearily to his room, could not resist a faint sensation of

relief at the thought that for the next night at least there would be no disturber of the silence in the house.

Leaning on the window-sill, before which he knelt, with the night-wind stirring his hair, Frank, falling back into silence again, gave himself up to thoughts and dreams once more. After all, he was young, all his life was in front of him. there must arrive some chance at last for him. And he would see Landene—and the lovely Lady Farnim—and all sorts of things might come.

The honeysuckles were sweet beneath him, the garden lay in mysterious shadows below, and the starlight shone above—he was young enough for dreams, and the enchanted palace opened its doors to him.

CHAPTER VI

AND meanwhile, the preparations were nearly completed for Amy to leave her home.

Who shall describe those preparations?—the tremulous wonder and excitement that they caused, the awestruck words and whispers, the sitting up night after night to sew in tuckers or to alter the fit of dresses, the wonder and confusion in the day, the general work, and bustle, and sense of strangeness that they made. It was a wedding without a bridegroom, a getting together of new and beautiful things, which the little ones scarcely

dared to touch, and with that the feeling of an approaching parting that could be scarcely realised as yet.

The sense of beautiful things remained, however, in spite of all the pain of that. For first—to put first that which was greatest—Amy had one entirely new frock, and she had scarcely ever had a frock that had not been made out of somebody else's dress before. It was an evening dress too, and pretty, she had never imagined herself wearing anything nearly as beautiful. There had been much consultation over it. It was all white—so she had wished, and like her confirmation-dress in that; but then her confirmation-dress had been of a sort of dimity, and this was of some soft silken material, very soft to the touch and with a sort of shine in its folds. Soft white lace too rested on neck and sleeves, it had a band of white satin; and Aunt Catherine had given dainty white satin shoes to match. Robed in this, with rows of big white beads round her soft throat, and her fair childish head rising in awestruck childish grace above, Amy could not but feel entirely different to herself. She thought herself wicked for this; and yet on that first night when everyone else was

asleep, she could not restrain herself from rising very quietly from her bed and lighting a candle that she might open the box and look at the dear dress as it lay, and just kiss it once, because she cared so much for it.

After this the other dresses did not seem to be so splendid, they were made out of her mother's dresses or out of her own old ones and altered so as to appear to be in the fashion. There was not the same wonder and grandeur about them, and yet they were very charming and very exciting too.

Then there was the box. Amy had never had a box all to herself before, she had always shared with her sisters or with her mother, and found room enough for her possessions all the same. Now she had a separate trunk, made of black leather, with A. M. in white letters on the top; it seemed a symbol of that separateness from her relations that would soon be an actual fact for her.

And that separation—the misery and yet the wonder of it, the difficulty of knowing whether to be glad or sorry, the confused hopes that had no certain facts on which to rest! The idea of a

country house, of an entirely new position, of being entirely away from home and friends, how was it possible to understand these things? Oh, was it very wicked to be so glad to be relieved from that ceaseless burden of all the cares of home, when that release meant a separation from all home ties as well? Amy thought so and tried hard to be sorry and then rejoiced in spite of herself, and then thought of all the dangers of the new existence and became terrified again. Her mind was confused, it seemed as if until she had fairly started there would be no hope of rest for her.

And, with that confusion in our thoughts as well, we need not dwell too long upon the new workbox, and the little desk that the father bought (though these were very wonderful indeed), nor upon the dressmaker, with a very long face and endless stores of pins, nor upon the numberless little arrangements and contrivances with which family love surrounded the traveller at the end. Mrs Merse went about with somewhat tightened lips, and never said that she was sorry or expressed regret at all. The younger children, boys and girls together, were a great deal too excited to be

grieved Perhaps the deepest pang that stirred Amy's own heart was the thought of little rough-haired Tommie, who would have grown so much older before she could see him again, and who would so soon forget her when his little hot lips could kiss her in the darkness no more.

She did not think that there was someone else, besides Tommie, who must now grow older too. That silver line of a river of which we have heard so often—once crossed, there is no getting back to our childish years again.

So the last days slipped away like slow dreams that were yet in haste to go, and the last evening came, and her trunk was packed, and the last morning, and the whole family shared the early breakfast, even the smallest ones for once. And her mother went quickly about making little arrangements, and her father took her in his arms (she felt why he did so when no one else was near) and whispered a few timid words that he had not the courage even then to speak aloud. And as the tears rose to her eyes she determined silently that she would indeed 'be good.' And then came the last hurried moments, and the last kisses, and

then she was driven away in a cab down the grayness of the street. The silver line had been crossed and her home and childhood were left behind her now.

CHAPTER VII

THE June afternoon was very bright indeed when Frank Mannian entered the little station near his home. He had walked quickly to it down the hill, seeing the white distant smoke of the train before him as he came.

Certainly it was a pretty station, a pleasant starting place for a journey on which a decision must be made. For the station-master's house was red with roses, and fields in which the hay was cut lay all round, and as you stood on the platform you could look beyond them to the village on the hill,

and the dark trees round the church. Frank had gathered some pink wild roses with which his button-hole was gay, and he sent his clear whistling before him as he walked.

The train came in as he entered, and he had not much time in which to choose his seat, for at his very entrance into the place he had been delayed. The station-master had desired to say that his daughter had been 'a sight better after the stuff Mr Mannian had sent,' and a tall lad had touched his slouching cap as he passed him, and begged Master Frank's pardon, but wouldn't he be, then, at the cricketing to-night? Amongst one's own people there is so much always to be said, it is rather difficult for even necessary business not to be delayed at times. And so it came about that, not having time to look for a smoking-carriage, he entered the first he could meet with rather hastily at last.

A young lady in a gray travelling ulster was seated in the farthest corner, and she raised her face with a look of much alarm as he came in. Frank had the kindness to seat himself at the farthest angle from her that he could, but this was not so much in deference to her fears as

because a small sickly boy held up in his father's arms was waving his hands towards him as the train went on. Frank knew the children well about the place, and he was attentive enough to forget his companion for a while. He had observed her, however, as he entered, and without displeasure, for although he had an objection to pretty girls as depicted in the letters of his friend, he had no objection to securing one as a travelling companion for himself.

After an interval in which he looked out of the window, he ventured to steal a glance at her again. She was looking out of the opposite window, with her face turned as far as possible away from him. Still he could observe a little of it from where he sat. Yes—certainly she was pretty, fair soft hair curling a little just by her ear, and long eyelashes drooping upon the fair softness of her cheek. Only a child though!—and with a nose that was not perfect—there would not be very much after all to be made of her. He looked out of the window again.

Amy meanwhile had been making herself sufficiently unhappy in her heart. The first part of her journey had been so pleasant and so quiet,

she had been alone all the time, and had managed the one 'change' that had to be got through so well. Then when the dread of that was over, though a little inward quivering still remained, she had been able really almost to be calm, had made her little meal, and that over, had resigned herself to a meditation such as she had scarce ever in all her life had so much leisure for before. Oh! she would learn to be good, very good, she would begin again now, and keep all the promises that she had made. Tender hopes, vague unformed ideals, were beginning to stir within her heart, new resolutions, consecrated even by the terrors of the new unknown future were just beginning to be formed,—and now a young man had entered and all these thoughts were spoilt.

Amy knew nothing whatever of young men, and had never in all her life been alone with one before. She had her own code of propriety, naturally the stricter because she had so few ideas of life. She was not sure that it was right for her to be travelling alone with this stranger, she would have suffered a great deal rather than speak to him, and she even began to debate within her mind whether, if the train stopped, she ought

to change her carriage and seek more company elsewhere. No! she felt that she would not be able to have the strength to move, the very thought of that was almost too painful to be borne. Then she must remain where she was, quite quiet—she ventured here for the first time to steal a glance at him. He was looking out of the window; there was real relief in that. She turned her own head to the rapidly passing prospect and tried to imagine she was calm.

But it is hard work trying to be calm, especially if you have before you a future of which you do not like to think, and close to you a companion at whom you do not intend to look. Amy got tired of the prospect, of trees and fields, of the movement of her heart that made the blood burn within her cheeks, and of that foolish longing to turn her head that can come over us for even the smallest thing that is forbidden. She remembered at last, and the thought came as a relief, that there was a book in the travelling bag she had placed above her. It seemed very dreadful to move, but it was almost more trying to be still. With a great effort she rose and raised a timid arm above her head; there were other parcels there, and the travelling

bag had been insecurely placed, as she touched that it gave a sudden jerk, and came down with a crash upon the floor.

In another instant Frank had crossed over to her end of the carriage and had picked it up from the ground and placed it in her hand, whilst she was still too much confused and in too great alarm for thanks. He caught a glimpse, however, of softly-flushing cheeks and of eyes whose deep gray darkness came almost as an astonishment to him. She was really pretty after all, he had not been wrong in that.

‘It did not hurt you as it fell, I hope,’ he said.

‘Oh no—no—thank you,’ whispered Amy, between little pants of fright. She took out her book, and looked up rather helplessly with her dark eyes, the colour growing deeper in her cheeks. He understood her wish at once.

‘You will let me arrange it for you,’ he said, and taking it from her he suited the action to the word. Then he sat down, opposite to her now. She kept her eyes down and would not look at him. He went on speaking, this persistent shyness was entertaining, and awakened in him a certain desire to tease.

'Do you find the sun comes in too strongly through this window?' he asked.

'No—thank you.'

'Have you been travelling long to-day?'

Evidently he intended to talk. Amy's heart gave one great bound, and then seemed to stand still. Then she raised her eyes with a terrible effort, and spoke.

'My mother does not like me to talk to people I do not know,' she said.

She had achieved the end that she desired, for the colour mustered suddenly in her companion's face. Frank was surprised into defeat, he had no resource but to say inwardly, 'What a little fool,' and to fall into the silence she had wished. And at the same time he felt rebuked, he had enough goodness of heart to know that he had drawn down this remark upon himself. She looked out of the window, then with a reaction of fear that she might have been very rude she glanced round timidly at him. Their eyes met and he smiled, and then each looked out of the window again.

Moving trees and fields, a changing prospect, the ceaseless rush and shaking of the train. It

all went on for a long while, and in the silent carriage neither moved nor spoke. Then Frank became aware of something white fluttering on the floor close to his foot, and he stooped and picked it up. It was a direction label, and as he held it the address upon it caught his eyes at once—

‘MISS A. MERSE,

Landene.’

‘I believe this belongs to you?’ he said.

‘Oh, yes, thank you, yes,’ whispered Amy, with less of an effort than before. But as she took it from his hand another feeling made him speak again, with something more of quickness in his tone.

‘Excuse me for one instant. Landene! Are you going there — to Lord Farnim’s place, perhaps?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘That is curious. I am going there as well.’

Amy raised her eyes to him, but remained entirely silent from surprise.

‘It seems to me we may be obliged to speak to each other sometime,’ said Frank, with his little outward movement of his lips. And then, this little

shaft over, he unfolded a newspaper and began to think he read.

Amy, meanwhile, sat with her eyes downcast, lost in a wonder that became a meditation too. So he was going with her—this companion whom for now nearly an hour she had seen, he would be with her in this new place that was so unknown as yet. She was not sorry—with the fear of that future beginning to beat within her heart, even this newly gained companionship meant help. And she had been rude to him, and on the whole he had been really kind to her. Would her mother have been vexed with her if she had known? She raised her eyes almost unconsciously and in a deprecating way he was looking up from his newspaper, and their glances met once more.

‘Have you ever been to Landene before—if I may ask?’ he said.

‘No, never, not at all,’ she replied, in a little flutter that would come when she tried to speak to him. And then with another thought that gave some dignity even to her shyness, she went on in graver tones; ‘I think I ought to tell you. I am Lady Farnim’s companion, I am not a visitor to her.’

‘Really?’ said Frank, with a surprised interest, that could be heard in his tone, ‘I did not think of that—well I am as much a stranger as you are and I am come on business or I should not be there—Do you know Lady Farnim?’

‘No, I know nothing, nobody,’ said Amy, whilst the hot colour of an agitation that she could not subdue gathered and burnt upon her cheeks. ‘I have never been away like this from my home before. And it is that which makes me so afraid.’

Her eyes were burning with a sudden agitation that only his presence could preserve from tears. Indeed, it was not only the future that was troubling her, the sense of recent blunders was hot within her mind, she could feel no confidence in her own strength or in her own experience now. But he replied at once in the cheerful tones that she felt were meant to soothe.

‘Oh, you needn’t be frightened, there’s not the least necessity for that. Things are so easy, so much easier than we think they are, that’s the queerest part of life, I am sure everyone you meet with will be kind. And if I can ever help you in any way—though I shall not be there for long’——

There was a pause, during which Amy wondered if she ought to thank him, and found that it was quite impossible for her lips to form the words. she spoke in whispered tones on another subject, after a little while had passed.

‘Do you know—will it be a very long time before we are there?’

‘Oh, half-an-hour yet,’ said Frank, after a consultation of his watch.’ ‘And now, until we are there, I won’t trouble you again.’ He moved away back to his old place with a feeling of interest and of entertainment in his heart. This shy ignorant child—the beautiful gambler of whom he had heard—the little scene that had just passed—these things had their piquancy for him. It was a bit of graceful comedy on the road to the enchanted palace, a passing amusement that lent its interest to the way. He took out his newspaper, and became now absorbed in its contents.

But Amy, sitting in her corner, with her fair head drooping, was lost in graver thoughts. The interview, her mistakes, her companion, had affected her more deeply than himself. She was beginning to be frightened at her stupidity, and whilst her timid prayers clung to Higher help, to

cling a little to the fancy of his help as well. Life began to seem more wide, but much more hard. It was only by slow degrees she could calm herself into quietness again.

Indeed, it cannot be said that she was wrong. Enchanted palaces have dangers, and not less for those who do not even know themselves to be in need of help. This passing interview is only a temporary affair, but the time may yet come, young companions, when you will need each other's assistance after all. They sat silent in their corners, and the train went on with them. . . .

It was about an hour later, and the shadows of the evening were falling, when the Landene carriage, with the coronet upon the door, stopped at last before the lodge. The two adventurers had not spoken much as they were driven in its close shelter along the darkening roads. They had sat silent, absorbed in the thoughts of what lay before them now. Frank had been very kind and helpful at the station, but he had his own private reason for perplexed imaginations, for he had observed, what had escaped Amy, that the

servants who were there had not seemed prepared for him.

However, here they were, and the woman at the lodge was opening the great gates, and they passed under the darkness of the trees to the wider prospect of trees and grass beyond.

'This is the park,' said Frank.

The sun had set, and the summer evening shadows were falling softly on the place. It was a cloudy evening, hot and still, there were gray vistas between dark plantations, the great park lay in the mysterious solitude of evening. And now beyond could be seen more trees, and the gray walls of an old mansion, between the darkness of their boughs.

'That is the house,' said Frank.

Amy scarcely knew how the last few minutes passed. They were over, the carriage had rolled round the drive and stood still before the steps. And then she saw the hall door thrown open and a glow of light within. It took all the courage that she had to move. She got out, trembling, with some assistance from her companion and walked trembling up the steps. At the top she paused and for one instant turned her face towards the

view beyond. The carriage was going down the drive, the grayness of the evening was on the dark trees that shut out the gardens, and through which could be seen glimpses of the park upon the left. It seemed to her as if she would like to escape out into it all again. There was only that one instant allowed her. In another moment they had crossed the threshold and were standing amongst the lights of the hall. The door closed heavily upon them—from out of the outside world the companions of the captivity had entered.

Part Third



The Companions of the Captivity

CHAPTER I

THEY stood still—the lights held by the bronze statues gleamed on them from dim corners, the pictures, dimly seen in the doubtful light, stared darkly upon them from the walls. It seemed a great, dim, mysterious place, this stone-paved hall that they had reached. But now a footman moved before to lead the way, and even as he did so a door on the left opened and a little figure, holding a light, and with a long dark train sweeping behind came out to them.

It was not a sight to be forgotten—the face and

figure appearing now so suddenly from out of the darkness on the left. The light that the lady carried was upon her, and made her stand out with distinctness from the gloom. Amy seemed to see it all in an instant, the dark lovely face with the shining lustrous eyes, the dark evening dress of some silky dead leaf colour floating softly behind her as she came. She might have been some spirit, some moving picture coming so from out of the gloom. But she put down on a table the little lamp she held, and coming quickly forward took hold of Amy's hands with her own small hands at once.

'So you have really come, dear: I am so glad. I have been feeling as if I were waiting for you through all the day. Mr Grimson has told me so many things of you. Come, I must kiss you, and then we will go upstairs at once.'

Minna was fully intent upon a gracious reception, it was perhaps the first time she had ever tried to charm one of her own sex. She drew down the childish face to her lips, she pressed and caressed a little the hands she held. Her low soft tones lingered still upon Amy's ears, the feeling of beauty, of grace, of a graciousness which she had

never even imagined before, overwhelmed her with its confusion as she stood. But now her companion, who had been a little behind her, came forward to her side, and the lady of the house in some surprise, let fall her hands at once.'

'I must introduce myself, I think,' said Frank, his sunburnt colour growing a little more hot, and yet with far more ease than his younger companion could have shown.

'I have come down to see Lord Farnim at his request. Would it be possible for me to speak to him at once?'

'You came down to speak to Lord Farnim?'

repeated Minna, softly, standing now in front of the young man whom her dark eyes observed closely in some intent surprise.

'Yes. To speak to him on some business of which he knows. I am his cousin, and he appointed this day for me.'

'You are very unfortunate. Have you come from a distance? Lord Farnim is away from home.'

Frank remained silent for an instant, whilst his eyes drooped. Then he raised his face again.

'I suppose,' he said, with an effort, 'that he left some message about me.'

'I am afraid—none. I know of none, at least.'

Again silence. A little heat of shame and vexation had gathered on the young man's face, but in spite of that pause he did not find it impossible to speak.

'I ought not to complain,' he said, smiling, as he raised his eyes. 'I am not of enough importance to be remembered.'

'I am very sorry,' Minna's tone had softened, and she appeared to have been pleased. 'It seems all very mistaken, and I cannot imagine what you must think of us. But if you could wait a little—ah! here is my maid; Norris, will you show Miss Merse upstairs. You will like to go to your room, dear. I will come there soon and talk to you.'

With a pretty gesture she took the childish hands of her companion and pressed them once again with a sweet confiding smile. The lovely eyes bent upon her seemed to fascinate poor Amy, she felt half-enchanted, as if she were in some dream from which she could not wake. And yet, in actual truth, Minna was much more occupied

at that moment with the other visitor who was there.

She turned to him as the others left the hall, saying with a slight smile that gave its brightness to her eyes: 'I cannot call myself able to do Lord Farnim's business, but I will do the best I can. Will you come for a few minutes into the smoking-room with me?'

It was the room she had just left; she took up the lamp as she passed and carried it in with her. Evidently this had been her husband's favourite room. It retained many signs of his presence, worn-out pens and papers on the table, some water-colour sketches lying in a careless heap, a gun and riding-whip in a corner, some heavy boots, an old easy-chair by the fireside, and a quantity of newspapers upon a stool. The red curtains had been drawn over the window-doors, there were bookcases from floor to ceiling, and a splendid proof-etching of Rembrandt's over the mantelpiece. Everywhere were signs of the careless neglectful ease of a gentleman's privacy, and the young lovely bride, moving freely amongst all these things, seemed in herself the one thing

needed to complete them all. Or so it seemed to the uninvited visitor at least.

Lady Farnim had drawn two chairs carelessly together on the rug, and seated herself as carelessly in one with her right elbow resting on her left hand and her right hand bent beneath her chin. In this attitude, with her chin slightly raised, and her dark eyes looking up at him from beneath that darker shade of eyelashes, there was a subtle element of subdued mischief in her face which gave still more life and play to the brown exquisite loveliness on which he looked. Indeed she was feeling a real exhilaration that had grown unwonted now; the wine of life was touching her lips again. Frank did not accept her mute invitation, he stood before her with his arms behind him, looking gravely down on her. With that gravity and in that position he might have seemed like an older schoolboy waiting to be examined, but a new feeling that he could scarcely understand had touched him, notwithstanding—he was close to loveliness, and he felt inclined to linger out to the utmost this interview that he had gained. But this feeling was not made too apparent either in

the gravity of his manner or in the simple directness of his words.

'I must begin at the beginning, if you will forgive me,' said Minna, looking up at him with the faintest gleam of subdued merriment within her eyes. 'May I ask first—What is your name?'

'I am Frank Mannian.'

She smiled now, with that pleased look once more. But she went on with an attempt at business gravity, though that faint mischievous gleam lingered beneath her manner all the same.

'Then, Mr Mannian, may I ask next—What did you want from my husband?'

'I thought—I was not sure'— Frank found more difficulty in choosing his expressions now, 'he has given me a sort of hope that he might find some employment for me on his estate. He appointed this day for me to come down and speak to him.'

'There is the gong,' whispered Minna, as its dull sound echoed through the hall. 'Well, Mr Mannian, I can only say that I am exceedingly sorry you should have so much reason to be displeased. I think the best thing will be for us to have dinner now, and then we will talk over in the evening what can best be done.'

‘But are you sure I am not in the way?’ Frank was beginning entirely to realise by this time his position in the house. ‘I will come up in the morning if you prefer it, and go out into the village now—I suppose there is one—and find a lodging there.’

‘The village is more than a mile away, and do you hear the rain against the panes?’

‘But that makes no difference to me,’ with the laugh with which young manhood throws aside such physical precautions. ‘I rather like a stormy night, I think. Let me make my apology to you now, Lady Farnim, for coming at all on you in this way, and then go.’

‘I am very much obliged to you,’ said Minna, rising and bending her head in a manner in which stateliness and mischief were combined. ‘But it is not my intention to turn my first guest out of the house, whatever you may wish. And I am very glad to have an opportunity of receiving one of my husband’s relations.’

A little fluttering colour rose on her cheeks, and she cast down her eyes—the very image of a young shy bride exercising with timid grace the first hospitality within her home. That

trembling flush made Frank turn away his glance. He did not know how sick at heart she felt.

She moved to the door, whispering something about 'arrangements,' then, as he was hastening to open it for her, she turned round suddenly on him. Some ghost of a suspicion seemed to have crossed her mind, her words came with more sharpness now.

'You came into the house with Miss Merse, I think. Have you been acquainted with her before?'

'We met for the first time in the train,' said Frank. 'It was only by accident that I found where she was going.'

'And you made friends there together, I suppose?'

Minna had returned to her gentler smile again.

'Friends, hum! I am not quite sure of that. She seemed so very much afraid.'

'Of the journey? No wonder. Poor child, I dare say she has not travelled alone before.'

'Of—of me, I think.'

Their eyes met, full of unexpected laughter. Minna had never been so natural for a long time, and it seemed relief to her. She was standing opposite this young man, who was almost exactly

the same age as herself, their eyes still met with the free wonder and amusement of two young beautiful creatures standing on the threshold of their life, and then with renewed merriment they both laughed again. It was only a passing instant, Lady Farnim recovered herself, and entreating him to excuse her for a few minutes, left the room at once. In another minute, a grave personage, whom he supposed to be the butler, took possession of him, and escorted him upstairs, to a room where he could dress.

‘So that is Lady Farnim, the gambleress,’ Frank considered, as before the old-fashioned looking-glass he struggled with his tie. ‘I wonder now if that tale of her is true. Well, I am glad I have seen her, it is something to have the idea of such a face as that, but still—I’ll be hanged if after this I ever go near a Viscount’s house again!’

‘A nice boy,’ reflected Minna, with something of sadness in her thought, as she paced up and down the gathering gloom within her room, a solitary dead-leaf robed figure dimly reflected by the mirror as she walked; ‘Very good and open hearted in all things I should think. I wonder if he will get

to London and learn the odious manners of the rest.'

She was too much occupied with him to remember that she was leaving her other companion without the visit she had said that she would give. But after all she had given her enough of welcome down below.

* * * * *

Five minutes later the three companions were all in the smaller drawing-room together, waiting for the dinner gong to sound. That made a cheerful scene, it was long since the gloomy house had known so much of company.

The smaller drawing-room was upstairs next to the billiard room, and though it had not been refurnished it had been set in order by Lord Farnim for his bride. In spite of its title it was a large enough room, blue furnished like its more spacious counterpart beneath, with costly ornaments upon side tables, and mirrors with framed miniatures of French beauties in their niches, and family portraits smiling landscapes, and heads by Vandyke upon the walls. Over the white marble Venetian mantelpiece was a Lady Farnim, the grandmother of the present owner, standing in white satin

serene and queenly, with her dark eyes looking down upon the room. Two lovely little boys, her sons, made a smaller picture by her side, and a little delicately beautiful miniature represented the last Lady Farnim who had died so young. They made a family group that was not without its charms, but one face at least was wanting to complete the rest, the present lord had no likeness of himself upon his walls.

Near the white marble mantelpiece was Minna's favourite chair, a little low blue satin affair with a curiously inlaid work table by its side. She was seated now on that, the glow of the fire upon the beauty of her face, her dark rippling hair gathered away with gold pins from its subtle loveliness, and great golden beads, her only ornaments, resting like shimmers of light upon the brown exquisite softness of her neck. As she sat silent now, leaning back, her lips, which were parted, had in them a little plaintive quiver of content, it had been so dreary to her to be alone so long. For though her features, when she spoke, could light up into the magic of her beauty as of old, they had gained a look of weariness and fever, in repose.

Frank, standing on the rug before the fire, observed her attentively as he stood. His own figure and face, in spite of his claim to be a relative, had no look of the family about them; they had a sturdiness of form and colour that found no place in the pictures on the wall. Nevertheless, they had no small share of the young, strong beauty that youth and health can give, and now and then, when he fell into momentary thought between pauses of conversation, his features took for the instant that look of grave mobility that could recall his father's face. He was more quiet than usual, subdued perhaps in spite of himself by the size and richness of the room, his voice came in lower tones, and there was only now and then a slight gleam of the audacious flash that usually visited his dark blue eyes so often when he talked. He was thinking that all this was very grand, but that he was losing his evening's cricket after all.

Amy was a little behind, upon the sofa, with her fancy work, which she had brought down to comfort herself, upon her knee, and her dark eyes drooping as she sewed. It is not necessary to say with what terrified trembling care her evening

toilette had been made, and it seems perhaps hard to add that it did not produce a very grand effect after all. It was an old spotted muslin, often washed, over an old blue slip that had been an early married dress of her mother's years ago. Even the lace upon the neck and sleeves had been often ironed as well, and was not more soft for that, the blue silk band had been turned, and the white kid slippers had seen their best days and required to be carefully concealed. Nevertheless, in spite of these things, the dress made, if a shabby, still a white and dainty sheath to the fair child's head above, and the little gold chain fitted in close rings round her neck. Amy was in a dream of bewilderment and shy confusion, scarcely daring to move or speak or raise her eyes—lost in the novelty of her new experience still. She longed to get over this misery, and begin to understand it all, but she was moving in dreams, and that seemed impossible to her.

One thing had consoled—when she took her first trembling steps into the drawing-room, where the other two had entered just before, Frank had risen from his chair to remove a footstool from her way, whilst his eyes met hers with a reassuring glance.

The kind intention of that little movement and look were not to be mistaken; as she sat down shyly in her seat a little heart-throb whispered that she would like a time to come when she could give some help to him. The remembrance of the trembling prayers she had whispered by her bedside was also in her heart—and Lady Farnim smiled at her, and asked her questions about her work—and she must try to do the best she could.

So the dinner gong sounded, and Frank gave an arm to each lady and escorted them downstairs, and he and Lady Farnim made lively conversation through the meal. It was all so long, so grand, the silver shone so strangely, there were such beautiful flowers on the table. Oh! how would it be possible to be at ease amongst it all?

And then, like a dream changed, they were all upstairs again, and Lady Farnim had made her draw her chair quite close, and was looking at her work, and admiring it, and lavishing on her such caresses as one lady can give to another—perhaps not the less willingly in this instance because a man was near. Amy had never been so much petted or so much caressed before, she

felt very unhappy and tired, and longed to be in her room and be alone.

‘Can you play, dear?’ asked Lady Farnim, after some considerable while had passed.

And then—oh! she must not move, she must not think of moving. A footman was sent to ask the maid to find her music for her—and if she would be so kind, and it seemed cruel, didn’t it? on the first evening; but still if she only would—there was left to her no power of choice at all. It was almost unbearable agony to have to walk across the room towards the piano at the end, it was even greater misery to have to take her seat and begin to find the place in her book. Frank had opened the piano and lit the candles for her—but these other things had of necessity to be endured. Her heart beat so fast that she could scarcely hear the notes as she at last began to play. She need not have been afraid, her two companions had not the smallest intention of listening to her tunes.

As Frank returned slowly to the rug, Lady Farnim looked up for one instant at him, and by her slight smile and glance, intimated that he was at liberty to take the seat that her other companion had left. He sat down in it at once.

She had said she would speak to him, it seemed natural that this opportunity for a *tête-à-tête* should come.

Yet for some few minutes they said nothing, but only sat with their faces turned towards each other, lazily waiting for the inclination to converse. Minna leant back in her chair, her face dark and lovely against the brightness of its background, glancing at him from under her long eyelashes, with eyes that seemed to shine with a dark and eastern light. Frank had picked up her great black and gold fan from the ground, but he did not restore it to her, he kept opening and shutting it softly with his strong fingers whilst he looked at her. In all his life he had known no experience of flirtation, but there are some unlearnt things that come very natural at times. Minna was conscious to the end of her fingers of his glance, conscious of some resistance in it and of subduing too, pleased with her excitement and fresh attempt at mastery—if this had been old days, it would have been time for the pigeon-plucking to begin.

But old days had not returned, and this passing pleasure had no serious business in it to give a

deeper meaning to its life. It was even strange that it should have so little significance for her, that she should be close to a young man and looking at him, and yet have no design of any sort on him, since she could not make use of his income, or turn him into a lover, and, alas! was in no need even of a husband. He could add an evening's interest to her lonely life, and that was all. Minna began to feel amused with the position, and also to feel good-natured. She had not, perhaps, experienced so unselfish a wish to give some help before.

'I wish you would tell me a little more about this affair of yours,' she said. And then, as he did not hurry to answer, she went on speaking with more directness still. 'At what time did you receive this letter of which you spoke?'

'Yesterday.'

'What!'

'I did, really now, and in the evening too. He said, my friend did, that Lord Farnim had asked him to write for him because he had no time himself. And I was to come down to-day, and then he would tell me all about the rest.'

There was a little pause, during which Lady Farnim lay back and appeared to reflect.

‘And he told you Lord Farnim would be here when you arrived?’

‘Yes, he did.’

‘My dear Frank, somebody or other must have been playing some trick on you.’

Minna pronounced the words inimitably, a sudden light of understanding giving its brightness of mischief to her face, whilst at the same time there was the serene graciousness of an elder sister, of the lady of the house, which made her able to take that liberty with him. Frank flushed to the roots of his hair, but he was not annoyed with her. There was a little vibration of his pulses, that was all.

‘And you think Lord Farnim could not have said that?’ he muttered after a while, trying to look as if he had not noticed the manner in which he had been addressed.

‘I know he did not.’

‘Hang the fellow,’ muttered Frank between his teeth. ‘It was more than I should have thought of him to try that joke on me. When I next meet the beggar, that’s all!’

He remained looking on the ground, without any further attempt to speak again. In fact, he was really vexed. He felt himself placed in a position of ridicule that might be remembered against him afterwards, and the light of Lady Farnim's eyes could not quite console for that. Minna saw his absorption, but was not altogether displeased. Other men had been so almost uninterestingly ready to be absorbed in her. The good-natured feeling rose still within her mind, and, as she looked at his troubled face, she felt ready to do what she could to give some help to him.

'It seems to me that the best thing to do, Mr Mannian,' she said, very softly, but broke off at once as he raised his head once more.

'That sounds so stiff!' he whispered, with an involuntary impulse as their glances met, and then as she looked at him in a reproving way he dropped his eyes again.

'It seems to me that there is only one thing left to do,' she went on with soft grave graciousness, as if there had been no interlude at all. 'Lord Farnim is very ready to be interested in his relations, as I know, and if you are in want of em-

ployment, and we can get you some, you will have the laugh upon your own side in the end.'

'Oh, thank you, you are kind,' he whispered with a shy earnestness, like that of a schoolboy who cannot even speak his gratitude aloud.

'What is it you want—what did you expect from us at first?'

'It was something about looking after the estate,' he hesitated, with some confusion in his tone. Indeed there came a mirthful ripple under the dark drooping eyelashes that partly hid from him his companion's glance.

'Looking after the estate, did you say? Forgive me, but do you think you are *quite* old enough?'

'I wouldn't rob you, at any rate,' said Frank, putting back his head, with the quick change of expression that flashed sparkling light into his dark blue eyes. ('What a handsome boy!' thought Minna inwardly for the first time, and was not perhaps less inclined to him for that.)

'We have indeed been trying to find an agent or manager of some sort,' she went on, with her soft graciousness, looking down on the brown slender fingers she had entwined upon her lap. 'Your friend was quite right so far. Lord Farnim

is in need of some resident manager, he expects to be so often away—with me—But we have already found one.'

'Oh.'

There was a little pause. In the distance Amy's fair head could be seen between the candles at the piano, and 'La Ci Darem' made trembling tinkling melody throughout the room.

'And what sort of a fellow—manager—is he that you have got?' asked Frank.

'Oh, a wooden piece of mechanism of fifty,' said Minna, rousing herself to playfulness with an effort, for there had been a poisoned dagger-stab for her in the last few words she had said. 'Very crabbed, very rheumatic, very methodical, with a voice like rusty iron, and eyes as red as if they had been boiled. But he has lived off and on here from his youth, and he is an ally of Mr Grim—of my husband's lawyer, I mean, and he understands all about everything here and so he is supposed to be quite perfect for the place.'

Again there was a pause. The piano sounded a little louder now, for Amy had advanced to 'Il Segreto' and it was more easily arranged.

'It seems to me, indeed,' said Frank, 'that if you are so agreeably suited you can have no need of me.'

'And yet it is just about that I want to speak to you,' she murmured, with a playful manner of correction in her tone. 'Mr Bortop understands all about things, but he is old, and has rheumatism and none of his sons can live with him in his house. I should think he might be glad, indeed I have heard him say as much, to have a younger man to be with him. At least, if you want to be here, I would call on him if I were you.'

'Oh, thank you so much, I will call on him at once.'

'But I don't know that you will suit him,' she replied in a dainty whisper between her lips, her dark eyelashes drooping still over her eyes as she looked at him. He replied with boyish quickness, that had yet some earnestness as well,

'Oh, that is hard. And why shouldn't I suit him? Too unattractive, do you think?'

'Too—too frivolous.' And then after a pause, and with a little change of tone, 'But I will do my best for you at any rate. I will write to Mr Grimson about you.'

‘Oh, if you would only write to’— But here he broke off short, conscious that to complete his sentence might be to take a liberty indeed.

‘To—to whom?’ asked Minna, innocently raising her eyes in some surprise to him. And then—a sudden enlightenment seemed to hold her breath, and brought a deep and painful colour on her face.

‘You think, I suppose,’ she said in a low voice and with her eyes lowered, ‘that Lord Farnim can refuse nothing to me yet. Well, I believe you are right, at least, I know a four months’ bride has claims. But my husband has a great deal to trouble him just now, and I want to be reasonable though I have some power.’

‘Oh, yes—of course, I know,’ he answered eagerly below his breath, apparently only anxious to retract the ill-considered request that he had made. But inwardly he was a little unable to understand the agitation she had shown.

After a while she looked up with composure, and with her brightest smile, and spoke again,

‘And you will forgive me then, even though I can’t do quite everything you wish.’

‘It’s hard to forgive,’ he said, leaning back and looking at her, with a little of the brightness of

easy flirtation in his eyes. For one minute there was a pleasant pause. But now 'Il Segreto' drew itself up to some amazing though not very brilliantly executed runs, and then down to some long and trembling chords—and stopped.

In another instant Lady Farnim was across the room, and had a hand on each of the shoulders of the little white-dressed companion who was there. Oh, dear Amy—she might call her Amy, might she not? How pretty all those tunes were to be sure. And how good of her to play all the evening—and was she not tired?—and she must insist upon it that she must go soon to bed and rest. She leant both her two dainty brown jewelled hands upon one of the white muslin shoulders now, her dark loveliness was close to the fair childish head, they made a picture as she stood. Perhaps it had dawned upon her mind that after all it would be best to be cautious and restrained with Frank.

He came up to them now, and shut the piano, and put out the lights, whilst Lady Farnim made Amy sit down in an easy chair, and leaning over her caressed her with little dainty touches still. Amy was tired, and felt her head confused, a

pleasant dream-like sense was stealing over her as if she had reached some ideal realm of lights and flowers and wealth—a gentle world into which no hard thoughts or words could come. She was so tired that her eyes were almost closing as she sat, she still felt the touch of the caressing hand upon her arm, when the other voice speaking near her roused her by its deeper tone at once.

‘Here is your fan. Will you not take it?’ asked Frank.

He was speaking to Lady Farnim, she looked up at him, and their eyes met. Amy saw the glance, a feeling of sudden sharpness that she could not understand seemed to touch her; with a little movement she removed herself from Lady Farnim’s hand and rose. She stood by one of the little tables, seeming to arrange her music, the other two were discussing the fan in low laughing whispers; they paid no heed to *her*.

Oh, how absurd she was, how little of anything she knew! Of course, it was natural that they should talk to each other and like to look like this. And Lady Farnim; oh, of course, it was certain she would want to please her guest, and yet if Amy could only be sure that it was right.

The large room, the lights and flowers, were becoming dim in their enchantment now, a mingling of perplexity and pain was in her heart, she was too tired to be sensible, and felt tears beginning to rise within her eyes. But now Lady Farnim, wishing to fetch her work, went back across the room towards her place, and in another instant she found that Frank was standing by her side.

‘I have been wishing to speak to you all the evening,’ he said.

His eyes looked down on her kindly. Amy began to forget that unexpected pain.

‘Do you feel comfortable? Have you got over all your difficulties yet?’

‘I don’t know; I am so stupid,’ she whispered, relieved to give even that little utterance to her distress. He answered with the kindness that is like a helping hand.

‘Oh, don’t mind, it will all come right in time. I feel such a fool myself, coming here when I was not wanted in this way. But we will get over our difficulties soon.’

There was a moment’s silence. Amy stood moving her fingers on her music, with her fair

childish head bent, looking down upon the ground.

‘Perhaps we shall have more if we stay,’ she whispered. Some little curious instinct seemed to move her, as if she must give some warning to this bright companion who made no trouble of his life. But he answered brightly in the quick boyish tones that did not seem to have learnt much earnestness as yet,

‘Then we must assist each other if we do;’ and turning away towards Lady Farnim, who returned, he began asking some question about an ornament on the table by his side. The low laughing whispered conversation began once more, but Amy did not feel so much inclined to be severe.

Then they all went out together to find their candles for their rooms. These were on a little table without, with a lamp in the midst of them. Amy went up to it and stood waiting, her two companions lingered still by the door of the drawing-room, for Lady Farnim had dropped her work, and had called to Frank to pick it up for her. Perhaps her sense of prudence was being slightly overcome by her desire for pleasure or for mastery,

but a sudden check recalled her to more painful thoughts again.

‘I will give you Mr Grimson’s address to-morrow,’ she said, smiling at him with her dark eyes, as he gave her work to her. He had bent his head at the moment, occupied with a needle and thread that were slipping from the delicate embroidery between his fingers, and he did not distinctly hear.

‘Oh, thank you, you are kind. Did you say you would give me Lord Farnim’s address?’ he said, and then stopped short, surprised by a change in her face, that arrested his glance at once.

‘I said—Mr Grimson’s address,’ said Minna, with a cold distinctness that made her words observable. ‘I think I told you that Lord Farnim does not wish to be disturbed with any business now.’ And then, recalling her self-command and with a smile; ‘It is not everyone, you know, who is so ready as I am to do business in the honeymoon.’

She had spoken with her old playfulness, but as she looked at him she saw that the change upon his face remained, there was a puzzled considering look upon his features still. If he had been annoyed it would not have hurt

her, the inquiring expression touched her like a pain, and she turned hastily away. Oh, would everyone be suspicious of her now?

She lit Amy's candle, she caressed her again with little pleasant touches, she said a bright 'good-night' to Frank, and walked down the passages by her side. Then at the door of her little companion's bedroom she kissed her affectionately, and then turned away to go to her own. Only she could not. She found herself wandering up and down amongst the passages instead. Oh, would everyone suspect her—this boy even, could no one who knew her ever believe or care for her? Oh, men were bad, cruel, there was no help to come from them—but this child to whom she had been kind, who did not know, who knew nothing of the world—

A hunger came over her for the childish lips, for the soft childish face that could believe in her as it was pressed against her own. Without pausing to reflect, she went back quickly to her companion's room. Amy had not undressed. She was sitting on the sofa at the foot of the bed, tired and bewildered in the midst of the old-fashioned strangeness that was round. Lady

Farnim sat down by her, put her arms round her, kissed her, held the soft childish face with passionate clinging force against her own. Oh, would she not try to love her, help her, she wanted to be loved so much? And Amy, held in that close embrace, crying tears of gratitude and fatigue, promised eagerly in broken murmurs that would scarcely form themselves to words.

'You are so good to me,' she said. And then Lady Farnim rose to go, and then, as if she could not help it, returned and took her into close embrace again. Once before she had so clung to human contact, but she did so with more determined purpose now. It seemed to her as if that childish trust might indeed be all she wished, as if the very sensation of that childish touch must heal. Once more she drew her back into her embrace, and kissed her, and clung to her, and went. Poor Amy—the distressed confusion that was left upon her mind might have served as no untimely warning of possible danger that was near.

Minna went to her room—the dark room with the gray brocaded hangings and the mirrors, and the old carved furniture, that had known her husband's presence once—and having dismissed her maid

began to walk with weary footsteps up and down. The wax candles upon the table before the glass reflected her dimly as she went, the long mirror gave back her reflection in more shadowy fashion still. If there had been anyone near to watch her face through the gloom, it would have been seen that it seemed to have returned, more than ever before since her marriage, to the expression of her girlish face again, or rather to that look of lonely shrinking terror that it had worn through the long hours of the nights whilst her engagement lasted—the expression of hard constraint that had succeeded her wedding was now relaxed for once. She had thrown her gold beads upon the table and had clasped with her little hands the brown small throat that her evening dress left bare, and which was all shrinking and quivering with sobs, whilst her dark eyes were flooded over with their childish tears. The darkness, the loneliness, her forlorn position, seemed to overcome her with agitation as she walked, she fell wearily into a chair before the table, and saw in the glass the trembling loveliness of her lips, and the great tears falling one after another down her cheeks. Then all at once in desperate clinging appeal to

the silence, she stretched out clasping arms, 'Oh, let him come back to me, let him come back to me,' she said.

The words fell into the silence of the night-time, there came no answer back. Amy was walking up and down her room, too tired and confused to be able to attempt to rest, or even to unfasten the loose roughened hair that hung partly uncoiled upon her neck. It was all so good, the lady was so kind, but she was troubled still. Far away across the country an old man with bent head, shaking lips, and yellow nervous fingers, was turning over old letters and murmuring Lady Farnim's name within Frank Mannian's home. And Frank himself, too excited to undress, had flung himself astride a chair, with bright eyes and restless moving mouth. 'It is too good to be true, I must take care,' he said; 'one may pay too dearly even for the position that one wants. She is a woman who looks as if she can make fools of fools—I have no doubt she will think it easy to make a fool of me.'

The wind moaned in ceaseless monotonous disturbance round the great gray house that night. It did not excite the inmates, who had long since

sunk to rest, only Minna, who had lain awake listening to the midnight chimes of the distant clock, heard the first rising of its swell and fall amongst the trees. That did not move her much, she had been sinking into a gentle sleep, lulled by fancies, sweet as morning dreams, which had taken their beginning from her tears—the reaction natural to her nature would not allow her to give way to the despair to which she had never yielded in her life, which affected her even now only as some phantom dread might touch the heart of a swimmer who has determined notwithstanding that he must reach the shore. To give way was to fail — if she kept on she would win all she wanted in the end. They moved round her head like brightening visions, as she lay half asleep in the great dim room where the one distant night-lamp burned—her husband's presence, an assured position, society under securer footing, London gaities, a wealthy home, and all the admiration she desired. And she would be a queen down here—and rule the estate—and be loved, and know that her descendants—

Softly and gently came the visions round her till she slept, lulled even by the wind that was rising

to a storm amongst the trees. It did not disturb her rest. For some while, a long while, struggling in the darkness, lost amongst the branches in the park, it tossed and moaned monotonously, then with rising fury it woke to wrath, and swept the branches before it as it went.

For how many years, how many generations, had not the wind made its wild lamentation in the Landene park at night, and greeted the births and mourned the funerals as they came! Link on link had passed, as generation after generation lived, ruled, was gone, leaving another to take its old position as it went. The family had been there so long, had risen to wealth and power through the centuries, had become like a tradition in the place.

But the wind had nothing to tell of these things as it stormed and moaned amongst the trees that night; as it tore its way amongst the boughs, making destruction as it went, it seemed to be speaking only of withered branches, and of other things, stronger, surer, more abiding, that yet are swept away as easily as withered branches when once the end has come.

CHAPTER II

MR BORTOP was beginning to have ideas. They had been slowly growing in his mind through all the summer, but with the ripening corn they were becoming more definite at last.

In a corner of the great park at Landene was Mr Bortop's home—a small, gray, gabled, slated house, with a patch of garden in front of it that through the greater part of the year was always bright with flowers, a patch of vegetables and currant bushes behind, a small paddock, a small orchard, an outhouse, and a coal-hole. It was

very complete, as Mr Bortop used with pride to say, and the parlour with wax-flowers over the mantelpiece, and a piano on which no one played, and books which no one read, and a window that was never opened, and a cupboard that was always locked, was to him, after its own fashion, an abode of splendour as wonderful as the greater drawing-room at the greater house itself.

In that corner of the park Mr Bortop had lived through almost all his life. He was, and had always been, a dependant on the Farnim family, and, as in all families there come times and circumstances in which the opinions of dependants become of great force and significance, we may pause for a moment to consider his opinion now.

Mr Bortop's father had been the village school-master, a man of more than usual learning and accomplishments, whom the grandfather of the present Lord Farnim had greatly favoured, had provided with a house and garden on his own land, and had otherwise assisted in his career. Thomas Bortop, an only son, had been in his earliest years the boy-about-the-place at Landene, had then been elevated into the gamekeeper of Lord Farnim's father, and had finally married

the housekeeper at the great house, and developed into a sort of agent or manager on the estate. His second patron, however, had died very young, never recovering from the shock of his wife's death, which occurred only a few months before his own; and though during the long minority of the young lord, Mr Bortop had proved himself to be exceedingly useful, he found himself inclined to leave Landene, as soon as the year of the majority was passed. Partly this was in consequence of the death of his own wife, a careful manager with a shrewd tongue, without whom the house had become more silent than he liked, but partly also because the new owner, reserved and strong-willed even in these years of his early youth, had not been too much disposed to confide in him. In fact, during long years of unlimited mastery, Mr Bortop had gained various ideas of his own concerning rights and perquisites, and Lord Farnim had always possessed one of those natures which, when they have once mistrusted, do not easily believe again.

In spite of these qualities, however, and of the amount of discomfort that they occasioned to him it will be difficult to estimate too highly the glow-

ing ideal that the young lord made in Mr Bortop's otherwise unromantic life. A 'mechanism of fifty, —as Minna had described him—hard, slow, imperious, selfish, with no dreams beyond his own personal ease, and few ideas save on the subjects of farming and preserves, the thought of 'the family,' and of 'the young master,' was the one only imagination that could stir his fancy still. Partly this was from self-interest; he had been used to boasting on these subjects through all his life; partly from the early education in gratitude which he had always been taught from his father's lips, partly perhaps from that intense reverence for titles that grows without much need of cultivation in an English heart. Some tenderness mingled also with his pride—he remembered the baby for whose existence he had trembled, the little boy who had once climbed about his knees, the fine young man who had come for assistance about his dogs and guns to him. Always, since the death of the last owner, it had been present to his mind that the young Lord Farnim was left alone now to represent his race, though that a family so distinguished should become extinct was a possibility almost too miserable for con-

templation in Mr Bortop's mind. After that year of the majority he left Landene for a while, but during his absence his memory clung to it still with all the heart he had, and though he was provided with a very comfortable abode on one of the two other estates that Lord Farnim possessed, the little gray house in the corner of the park, uninhabited after his departure, remained still his home to him.

So he went, and returned. If the reasons for his departure might have given those who cared to study them, some insight into the character of his master, his return was due to causes more significant of his master's fortunes still. There come times, as I have said, when the conduct and opinions of dependants become of a great deal of weight with reference to those whom they have formerly been accustomed to obey.

The moving spring in this instance, however, was not Mr Bortop, but a far keener and more unscrupulous head, the gray-haired lawyer in London, who had been Lord Farnim's guide and counsellor through all his life. Mr Grimson had possessed insight enough, even whilst he occupied this position, to be aware of the headstrong and

passionate character of the young man whom he ruled, and had prepared himself silently for the day when he would rule no longer. That day in part had come ; Lord Farnim's miserable marriage, as unhappy in its dissolution as in its accomplishment, represented the fact that he was able to assume direct control no more.

Mr Grimson regarded the marriage entirely from his own point of view, though he considered that to include his master's interests as well. He had shared with Mr Bortop and others the expectation that the young lord would remember it was due to his family that he should ally himself with one as distinguished for her rank as for her merit—a bride of title who would give added glory to his name. He had chosen to wed a lady distinguished neither for rank nor merit—that was the first misfortune which was beyond retrieving now. Because it was beyond retrieving Mr Grimson would have done what lay in him to make the best of that—it was the further complication that followed which had reduced him to rage and to despair. Lord Farnim had not even remained constant to the bride whom he had chosen ; he had separated himself from her by sudden caprice,

within a few months after his wedding, without even pretending to make complaint of her—and at the same time as in tacit acknowledgment of his injustice he had established her within his home. That was the crowning absurdity of the position; but Mr Grimson, considering the matter from all sides, could not as yet see it possible to find escape from that, he knew the passionate determination of his master's disposition far too well to venture upon any remonstrance or reproof with him. If Lord Farnim had not married the beautiful gambler he would have been glad; if, having married her, he had raised her to his own rank as his wife he would have forced himself to be content—but the present marriage, half-broken, and yet not annulled, had nothing of consolation to bestow. With all his heart Mr Grimson would have tried to prevent the parting of the husband and the wife, but if they were to be separated he would have liked the separation more complete.

And so it was that, as the months passed on slowly towards the autumn, other ideas than those which he had formed at first began slowly to work within his mind. His first vague hope that the separation might have been only caused by some

temporary anger was beginning to waver in his heart ; the letters of his patron to himself had in them no visible signs of wrath, but they had the quietness of hard resolve that the glow of wrath can form. He knew Lord Farnim too well to suppose that he would easily repent. If that hope, then, had to be renounced, what consolation of any sort remained? Lady Farnim was at Landene, in possession of the estate.

We need to understand these things in order that we may realise more fully the position of Minna at the time of which we speak—deserted by her husband, watched from London, surrounded by servants in the pay of her husband or of her husband's lawyer, suspected by the society that was nearest to her, lonely and craving for excitement, beautiful and longing for the old hopes and power again. Certainly she had not the childish ignorance that can dispose even well-meaning feet to falls ; she had experience and caution, she was aware of danger, and had no reckless desire to enter into perils that she knew. Nevertheless, at her age and in her position, it could hardly be that some danger did not remain for her.

Perhaps, even whilst keeping her beautiful watchful eyes upon the snares that were around her, she did not realise enough that some might come to her from Mr Bortop's hands—she despised his intellect, and was too much disposed to make a jest of him for that. He was a burly, untidily made man of fifty, tight in neckcloth, imperious in manner, as narrow in ideas as he was large and loose in form—he treated her with condescending severity to which she responded with most unfeigned disdain, it did not seem possible that she could have much to fear from him. Nevertheless, it was in Mr Bortop that Mr Grimson trusted most, and from his pen that he received those detailed accounts which even at the distance at which he was, could serve to him as guides.

Mr Bortop, seated comfortably daily in his little study in the little gray house that was in the corner of the park, did not concern himself much as to the use that was being made of him. He had always been submissive to Mr Grimson, because the lawyer, wiser than most of those with whom he had to deal, understood the amount of honey that the imperious need to make obedience possible. Mr Bortop found himself treated with deference and

gentle flattery, dark mysterious sayings were let fall to him in the letters he received—he was given to understand that his master's secrets should be no closed book to him. In himself he was far from being especially quick in perception; he shook his head very wisely over these communications, but he gathered from them only a confused idea that there had been some misunderstanding between Lord Farnim and his wife, and that it was necessary that he should keep a careful watch over the ways of the lovely Lady Farnim—an office that some penetrating sense of her disdain made him all the more ready to fulfil. That was all he knew, but that was enough for him.

As the summer passed slowly onwards, however, there came by degrees over his slow brain a certain dim notion of a change—there was no longer quite the same spirit in the instructions of the letters he received. Lady Farnim was, above all things, not to be thwarted; this was now the chief tenor of what Mr Grimson said; she was to be allowed to have her own way and to do the things she chose. Some little matters of fences and gates, about which she had

written, must be settled according to her will. And as for this young fellow, Lord Farnim's relation, whom she seemed to desire to help—well, perhaps it would be better to give him some employment about the place. Could not Mr Bortop manage to take him into his own house, as had been proposed, he might find the young help useful, and merely a nominal salary need be paid for it? It was Lady Farnim's wish, and her husband had desired that in all indifferent matters her wishes should always be obeyed.

It was Mr Grimson's wish, that was evident, and with some inward grumbling Mr Bortop submitted to the charge. He was indeed in some real need of assistance, but he did not like the idea of having a stranger in the house, he called it being 'interfered with,' and was prepared to treat the new comer with something less than civility when he came. Nevertheless, he submitted as before. And so it came to pass that Frank Mannian, who had been staying meanwhile at the vicarage of the old clergyman, (who had yielded at once to Minna's pretty confession of distress) found himself established as at least a temporary permanency in Mr Bortop's house, with a small room of his own, a

gray horse on which to ride, a slight pretence of a salary, and everything comfortable about him. No doubt there were disadvantages to be encountered, he would have liked to earn more, his new owner was surly, and he had not much experience to assist him in his work. But his home had not been an education in softness, he had a cheerful temper, and was disposed to admit that things went well with him.

More and more as the summer days went on did he begin to like his life. It was not, indeed, the companionship of the elderly agent that proved so congenial to his taste, nor even the inspection of gates and hedges, nor the riding through glowing afternoons to distant farms, though to these last things at any rate he had no objection as they came. He liked his work well enough, but the summer days had in them more deliciousness than that. Alas! I fear that what he liked better than his work were the long idle afternoons that he spent lying on the grass in the gardens round the house, with the blaze of the summer colours of the flowers all round him as he lay, and Lady Farnim's garden-chair close at hand as he made his reports to her. The summer afternoons

were hot and still, the wind made pleasant murmurs in the distant trees, the fruit and ices were pleasant in their coolness when they came, there was a dreamy sense of luxury around, he had not been used to wealth, and its enchantment had new delight to him. The feeling of luxury was soft as golden dreams, and with that basking delight to soothe it was easy enough for the summer days to pass.

Mr Bortop had never been too much disposed to have interviews with Minna, and was willing enough to spare himself her disdain by making young Mannian his messenger—but then he had not imagined at first that the messenger would have so much pleasure in the task. As the idea of this grew on him a surly irritation began to take the place of his content, and would no doubt soon have expressed itself to his companion, only that he happened to have at the time a sharp fit of rheumatism, and Frank proved himself useful as a nurse. Postponing his displeasure then till his recovery, he contented himself with revealing his feelings in a letter to Mr Grimson that he wrote.

Mr Grimson's answer arrived by return of post, and was of a nature to astound the correspondent

who had made complaint to him. For particular reasons that he was not at present at liberty to name, he said, he was of opinion that it would be better to lay no restraint upon Mr Mannian at all, especially in all matters in which Lady Farnim was concerned. If the young fellow proved himself idle and worthless that would be another matter, but Mr Bortop would be better able in a few months to judge of that. He would be always interested to hear any news of Lord Farnim's young relation that Mr Bortop found himself able to bestow. The letter ended with compliments on various subjects, but the wish in it had been distinctly marked, and Mr Bortop, with some inward grumbling, reluctantly submitted to its will.

He submitted at first in reluctant ignorance, and without any attempt at considering what the desire should mean. But as the summer days went on, a little roused and quickened by the hints that he received, he began to keep a closer and a more observant watch. It is possible, however, that even then his gaze became confused when he tried to see below the surface of events. Mr Bortop professed himself, with shakes of the head, as 'well able to see into a millstone as most

men;' but perhaps this was no large statement, considering the amount of vision into millstones that the world in general owns.

What were Mr Grimson's desires? and what were his intentions all this while? Perhaps he never told himself distinctly. He could hardly have been actuated by any very penetrating goodwill towards Lady Farnim, whom he had never seen, and young Mannian, whom he did not know—these people who had established themselves in the place that should have been his master's home. It is probable that he regarded them rather in the light of intruders whom he would like to dispose of if he could. And, viewing things in this manner, we may perhaps arrive at the conclusion that what he proposed to himself may have been something of the nature of a test. Doubtless his thoughts had in them but small intent of harm—the smallest hint of coquetry on his wife's part might touch Lord Farnim's pride and move him to the actions that were desired.

It is allowable, is it not? to put these little trials in the way of the human beings who are about our path, to test them, and prove them, and discover of what sort of composition their

characters are made. These things may be called curious studies, discoveries, researches, interesting to the psychological minds that we possess. So at least the matter appears when viewed in its most graceful light—but an ugly judgment, sharp and bare as steel, rests, only too often, beneath our graceful words. And allowing only its secret murmur to rest for a moment in our minds, we may whisper that it is a cruel thing to tempt any human soul towards a hook, and a still more cruel thing to use a young soul also as a bait.

Let that be. The summer days passed onwards with their cloudless skies, and the ripening corn began to give evidence that harvest-time was near. They were pleasant enough, those summer days, to one young heart we know—and yet Frank Mannian, in his bright and heedless youth, was in a position that might have been found to have dangers to feet more wary than his own.

The enchanted palace had its golden ease—it was to be hoped that it might have its guardian angels too.

CHAPTER III

VERY quiet and simple indeed some kinds of guardianship can be, noiseless as silent memories, or the touch of a childish hand, or the watching eyes that do not need to express themselves in words. The sense of gratitude may be a guardian, or the knowledge that another is grateful to us, or even the desire to help some weaker being—so many things there are that can save within the world. It could scarcely be that Frank was entirely without such help as these.

One thing of these he had indeed possessed—

the kindly wish to help, but that had grown rather fainter now with time. Nevertheless, a feeling of interest remained.

Let us return to Amy, who had now almost established for herself her silent position in the house—a ‘bit of delicate china,’ as Frank, who observed her often, called her inwardly sometimes. The name did not describe her ill, so softly tinted were her fair hair and the childish demureness of her face, and so entirely in harmony the little ornaments and the light summer dresses that she wore. You had to be well acquainted with these things before you could observe a little austere look that, in spite of their drooping grace, could still pervade them all.

Amy, on her part, was rather conscious of vanity, for she had the pretty dresses now that the lady of the house only too liberally bestowed. Let us imagine her—a childish figure rather small and slight in form, her fair hair fashionably crimped upon her pretty childish head, her drooping eyelashes hiding the wistful unexpected darkness of her eyes, her lips lying together in soft quietness, the edging lace making careful grace round her neck, and beneath these things the pale muslin

dress—with flowers and leaves of palest brown perhaps—all complete, down to the pretty silver buckles on her shoes. Was it possible not to be content, to enjoy a life of ease, and to be pleased after many trials with a sense of rest at last? But Amy had been brought up in the hardness of a poor home, and though she liked these things there was something still within her that was not quite at peace.

Oh, was it quite right to be so entirely pleased with all the luxury around, with these great rooms, (in which, in spite of her pleasure, her shyness lingered still) this solitude and idleness, these easily-gained caresses, these dresses and ornaments that could add so much beauty to her life? Far away in dusty London, Tommie must be waking in the night-time and disturbing all round him with his tears, and day-times must be hot and hard-worked, and very long to bear, and all the dreary details of refined poverty must be pressing with all their closeness on the rest. And she could not wish to be back amongst them all again; she shrank with a terror that she could not keep from herself from any thought of that—only that other feeling, lingering always near her

heart, seemed to whisper that she must be very bad to be so glad to be far away from home.

It was not that they wanted her, she told herself, with some of the soreness of humility that the sensitive can feel; she had never been strong enough to be of use to them. Her father loved her, and would miss her a little, but she had never made any real difference to his life. And she was so stupid, her mother had been always vexed with her. Tommie, he was so young, he must have forgotten her—a little sharp pang always stirred her heart at that.

She could not wish to be in the midst of all the work again, but she was wicked, and not affectionate like other people—this seemed on the whole the surest conclusion to be gained. In the midst of the luxury this made a little conscience-prick within her heart. If she could have brought herself to believe in such a method, she would have been ready enough to put a rough cord round her, or to introduce some sackcloth beneath the pretty dresses that she wore. As these ways did not seem suitable to modern forms, she made up for the want of them by a number of rules that made, indeed, a little set of chains complete. She was to

rise early every morning, that she might have one hour of history and another of sewing before she went downstairs. (The sewing consisted, for the present, in making into tuckers the yards of lace she had.) She was to find time for some practising in the day. She was always to do everything that Lady Farnim wished. She was never to speak more than she could help to any man, because her mother had once expressed a hope that no child of hers would flirt. After going to her room at night, she was to study Italian for an hour. Lastly—a curious renunciation—she was only to say her prayers in the morning and in the evening, because her mother had been vexed when she had found her once in the middle of the day upon her knees. As to reading the Bible, her childish desire for it was sufficient, and she made no rule on that.

Simple and plain; it might be well for some of us if life could be confined within such limits as these. With care and steadfast caution Amy sewed it into tuckers and shut it up into Italian dictionaries—she had no thought of any wider range that should include more of the world outside within its bounds. Yet, as any self-made rules, however small, are not too easy to fulfil—the

makers of self-made rules will surely bear testimony to this—it may be that her character gained in other ways than those of which she knew. The thought of her confirmation remained always present to her mind, these little austerities were to serve to regulate her life.

Meanwhile, above these things which lay unsuspected in her heart, was the childish demureness which served well for the companionship that Lady Farnim had desired. A slight pretty figure, she wandered through the rooms, her footsteps almost noiseless upon the carpets; the long mirrors no longer looked so dreary as they reflected the fair childish head, the great gardens so lonely as she wandered through them alone, bending over the rose bushes that she might choose the flowers to fasten at her throat. It was such a delightful thing to be able in this manner to have flowers to choose, to be able to wander in the park and see the gray and purple vistas, or the sun's golden light through the trees; to be able to look at flowers through all the house when she stayed within, or to see the harvest making golden loveliness through all the country when they drove. Shadows of

trees fell across the road, there were soft cool winds in the evening, and the park looked lovely in the twilight on a late return. Then there would be the soft lustre of wax candles in the great room, and the windows would be open, and she would touch the piano with less trembling fingers now, whilst Lady Farnim leant back in her easy chair in the distance with her fancy-work upon her knee. Life had become so pleasant, and so luxurious, so caressed and sheltered, with no greater sins than the omission of the Italian in the evening, with so much more loveliness in it than had ever entered into her mind before—it was a dream through all those summer months from which she had no faintest wish to wake.

And then, all at once, without warning or preparation, came one of those thrusts that wake us suddenly to the sense that in this sin-pierced world we can scarcely hope to dream. Very suddenly it came, a new revelation that was to change her life.

‘And so you really find yourself comfortable here?’ the friendly voice had said.

‘Oh, I must—indeed I must,’ she whispered,

‘because Lady Farnim is so kind and good to me.’

‘Hum, yes; I suppose she is very kind and good to you. But it seems an odd thing, doesn’t it, that Lord Farnim does not return?’

CHAPTER IV

AMY looked up with a startled wonder in her glance.

They were standing together in the great drawing-room. The pictures on the walls looked down on them, and the fruit and flowers on the ceiling; the August sunshine streamed in its splendour upon the garden without, and made a brightness even through the extent of the greatness of the room. The long mirrors between the windows reflected them as they stood side by side, the young girl and the young man; but for a while there was silence.

‘I—I don’t know what you mean,’ faltered Amy then. She whispered the words tremulously. A terror that she could not explain had seized upon her; her breath came and went, and her hands, in which were red roses, turned cold and trembled as she stood. She had been out in the garden, and a few other roses were resting in the blue silk belt of her dress. He stood near her with his hat in his hand, come in just lately from his ride. Her agitation had surprised him, and for a minute he had no more words to say.

‘Do you mean to tell me—is it possible that you have heard nothing at all of this?’ he said.

‘No—oh, I cannot think what you mean, I wish you would tell me.’

‘You have no idea at all of what the people think down here!’

‘No, indeed—indeed—I wish you would tell me now.’ In her agitation she forgot her usual rules, and raised towards him the appealing darkness of her eyes. Frank paused for a moment, disturbed and unpleasantly surprised. He had not had any idea of revealing secrets, and the position was not congenial to him, but he had said too much already to be able to retreat.

‘I don’t quite like speaking to you,’ he said, ‘and yet I can only tell you what you might have known already for yourself. Do you remember on that first evening—when we both came—I asked Lady Farnim if she would give me her husband’s address?’

Silence.

‘I do not think she knew it then.’

Again silence, and then Amy said in a low whisper, as if she were re-assuring herself against some evil that she feared, ‘He was travelling—one often does not know’—

‘I do not think she ever knows it.’

Again silence, a longer silence now. Amy stood with bent head, her fingers playing almost unconsciously with the roses in her belt. The mirror gave back her fair crimped hair and the dainty completeness of her blue and white, but the moving fingers had a nervousness that was not usual to her as she stood. Frank, young, strong, dark, a good contrast to her as the mirror reflected them, looked down on her and waited with some curious attention in his glance.

He was not prepared for the intensity of childish distress in the face she raised at last. ‘I cannot

understand—if you could only tell me now.’ He was moved by it, and felt impelled to give her the information that he had not wished to give.

‘You never heard it whispered that she is separated from her husband now?’

‘No—no.’

‘It is very queer,’ said Frank, when a further pause seemed to call on him to speak. ‘One would hardly think that they *could* be tired of each other yet, when they only were married in the Spring. And yet it must be so; there are so many things that can only be explained by that. This lawyer in London who settles everything, and all that sort of thing. I suppose they do not agree together and find that they are happier apart.’

Silence.

‘But that is wicked,’ said Amy then.

It is scarcely possible to express the manner in which she breathed out these few words—the only sign she could give of the childish intensity of horror in her soul. Frank had no means of understanding her—his words went far beyond the ideas that were within her heart at once.

‘Wicked!’ he said. ‘Oh, no; we will hope that

after all it is not as bad as that. Though there were queer stories about her before she was married—her gambling, and that trial of her father, and the fellow who shot himself for her—old Bortop has been telling me of those. Well, at any rate, she and her husband seem very comfortably apart—and, after all, it need make no difference to us.'

Again a pause.

'No difference,' whispered Amy, with long drawn out breathing then.

'No; I cannot see there is any reason why it should. For after all it is her look out, and is no affair of ours.'

'You say that she used to gamble,' she said, raising her childish flushed face with a subdued vehemence, as if she could restrain herself no more. 'You say that a man—I cannot bear to speak of it, it seems so terrible to me. And then you believe that her husband is quite away from her. And you think it need make no difference to me.'

A little pause

'Perhaps it does make no difference to you.'

She moved from him as she said the last few words, and, going to the further end of the room,

stood leaning over a little table, as if she were occupied in considering the pink oleander blossoms that were there. Frank stood still where he was, looking down the room to her. In those attitudes, and motionless as they both were, they might have been two figures in some comedy, fallen into position to suit the requirements of the scene. Some idea of this crossed his mind, but he would not move; he waited, curious to know what her next look or words would be.

He saw her bend over the flowers, closer still, as if she wished to examine them with a more attentive glance, and then he saw that she was trembling, and that with a little furtive movement she had pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. In another instant he had crossed the room to her.

‘Is there anything the matter? Do tell me, and let me help you, if I can,’ he said.

‘Oh, what shall I—what shall I do?’

If her words, a few minutes before, had given him some occasion for resentment, he had no power of feeling the annoyance of one reproved against her now. Her face was pale, her eyes brimming over with tears, the helplessness of childish distress had overcome her entirely. He was surprised; but it

was natural to him, that, with the surprise, should come the wish to help.

‘Is there anything I can do for you? I cannot understand why this should trouble you so much,’ he said.

‘Oh, what can I do? If all that you say is true, I ought not to stay here, I know I ought not; they would like me to come home, oh, I am quite sure they would. And I have been so happy here, and I don’t feel as if I were strong enough to bear—all the work—at home,’—she was sobbing beyond all power of her own controlling now. ‘And Lady Farnim has been so kind and good—to me,’—and the tears fell fast again.

Frank stood by her side, so much amazed that he could not even be amused at what appeared to him an overstrained distress. His voice came in the most soothing tones he could command, when at last he spoke.

‘My dear child—oh, excuse me, I didn’t mean that, I forgot myself just then. Really, Miss Merse, I cannot understand why you need vex yourself so much. I daresay that half the tales they tell down here are lies—and if Lady Farnim has quarrelled with her husband, it may be because

their tempers can't agree, and I do not know why that need make any difference to you.'

'But it is wicked, oh, I know it is, for a husband and wife not to live together because of that,' cried Amy, in too much distress to be able to consider what he might think of the words she said. 'I have always heard it is wrong; Aunt Marian says it is, I know Aunt Marian said she knew a lady who used to be knocked down with a poker, but she would stay because she knew it was her duty to keep with her husband to the end. If it is only—only for that—oh, I cannot think it is right for him to be away.'

'But you do not know after all. This separation—if there is one—may be all Lord Farnim's doing, and may not be Lady Farnim's fault at all.'

'But then there were the other dreadful things you said—about the gambling, and the man who killed himself, and all the rest. And if any part of them is true—Oh, I am sure they will want me to come home.'

Frank remained silent, standing thinking by her side.

In an ordinary case he would have been ready enough to attempt to soothe away her childish

fears, and would have taken pleasure in trying to restore her to more peace of mind again. But one thought had occurred to him that kept him silent as he stood, the remembrance of that mutual promise of help was still within his heart, her distress moved him to do all he could for her, and it had come upon him suddenly to think that in future times it might in reality be a disadvantage to this innocent child to have had her name associated with that of the Lady Farnim, who, whether innocently or otherwise, had made her own name sufficiently notorious in London circles once. The position was a difficult one, and he did not feel himself able to advise. But the sound of footsteps in the distance reminded him that Lady Farnim herself might soon be expected to appear, and he hastened to say the first thoughts that suggested themselves to him.

‘Look here, do you remember the promise that we made each other on that first evening when we came?’

No doubt Amy was ready enough for any re-assurance in her distress. She looked up with something like dawning hope within her glance.

Frank saw his advantage, and made the best of it at once.

‘Then I mean to keep it now and to do all I can for you. Only I want you to do nothing for yourself, to bide quiet for a day or two, whilst I find out all the truth I can. I have no doubt that what I shall discover will make you more able to decide. You will promise, will you not, to wait, and do nothing for yourself?’

Amy had only time to bend her head, for a door in the distance opened, and Lady Farnim appeared within the room.

She was in black, the colour that she preferred now, perhaps on account of the dignity that it bestows, and her light footsteps and the soft floating material made her entrance almost noiseless as she came. A broad-trimmed hat, of black lace and gold, shaded partly the beauty of her face. Her only ornament was a necklace of small stars of gold and turquoises, half hidden by the drooping black lace round her neck. Entering so quietly, with such rich quietness and grace in her attire, she seemed like some vision of elegance and pride; only, as she came close to them and spoke, the lovely girlishness of her manner gave

to her more the appearance of a princess than a queen.

‘Well, you idle people,’ she said, ‘how long have you been wasting your time without letting me know that you were here?’

‘Oh, I am not ready, I am so sorry,’ said Amy. ‘I will try and be quick.’

She hastened by, glad to hide her face which was still hot from recent tears, and on which her companion’s eyes were resting with an attentive glance. But Minna took no outward notice of what she had observed. She sat down without speaking, and Frank, standing by her, told her quietly the errand on which he had been sent. If there was a little constraint on each side, it was not made too apparent in their words. Amy came back, dressed for driving, the carriage came round to the door, and they all went out into the hall. Frank stood by the door of the open carriage to assist the others to mount. He saw that Amy as she seated herself was disposed to turn her eyes away, but that Lady Farnim, with a little caressing movement of one hand upon her shoulder, made her turn her face again as she took her own place by her side. The two heads,

fair and dark, were vivid as a picture for that instant under the blazing August sun. He closed the door and the carriage drove away.

Then he ordered his horse, and rode out into the country, glad that he had his morning's work to do. The farm that he had to visit was several miles away, its outhouses were being rebuilt, and there were many consultations to be made. All through the long hot ride he had scarcely thought at all, now he thought of mortar and workmen, made notes of possible expenses, and considered projected improvements with all the interest he could. He was ready to do something, a sense of approaching difficulties was in his mind, and he was glad to have no leisure to decide.

A little later, however, he was in a high apple loft to which he had mounted, quite alone, and with no more work to do. He had gone up to look at this place whilst his horse was being saddled, laughing and scrambling like a schoolboy up a broken ladder much in need of rungs—now he had completed his survey and was alone to think. A gravity, to which he was not used, was stealing over him, he stood by an open window in the roof and looked out upon the view.

In his after life he often remembered that scene, though without quite knowing why it should have impressed itself so strongly on his mind. It was a hot and cloudy day, in the farm-yard beneath were newly made stacks of corn, round which some men were standing; between and beyond these was the distant country, piled with storm clouds in the distance, hot, still, gray, save where the light had caught one field of corn that stood out distinct and golden from the rest. He stood and looked, whilst the grave feeling rose fast within his mind—then some men from below called him, and he scrambled down the ladder and went towards his horse.

Only the gravity that had been but a mere sensation a minute before was forming itself, even against his will, into distincter questions now—he had given a promise that he must make some effort to fulfil. And how, in what manner?—he had given trouble enough already by the careless repetition of statements he had made. How would it be possible to him to attempt even to verify those statements now—must he degrade himself into the position of a spy, or collect the idle gossip that it was a shame to him even to have heard? Only he could not be silent now—he might make even worse

harm if he were ; he could not break his word to one woman, that he might spare the other who had been kind to him. And probably, now that he had spoken, it might not even spare her if he did. What was he to do?—could he ask questions of her behind her back?—it hurt him to think that he had already spoken of her whilst she continued her friendliness to him. Without mounting, but with his arm upon the reins of his horse, he continued the discussion in his mind. ‘I cannot, and will not, be such a sneak as that. Whatever information I wish to have about Lady Farnim I must ask first from her.’

He stood leaning against the neck of his horse, his lips moving whilst he thought the words, whilst the men near him were watching in surprise. Then, recovering himself, he mounted quickly, and rode fast away.

The afternoon was already advanced when he reached the gray house within the park, and Mr Bortop had been impatiently expecting his return. He gave his report, took what dinner he could, and then, exhausted with the heat, shut himself up within his room to rest. The immediate decision that pressed upon him did not take long

to make, he had the young impatience that must rush upon a painful scene at once. Amy had told him the plans at Landene for the day, she was to drive to the town with the lady of the house, and do shopping in the morning; and in the afternoon they were to drive out again in the pony carriage, after the heat of the day was past, and would not be back till late. He determined to be at the house to await their return, and as soon as he had made that resolution he lay down upon his bed and slept.

Some hours later he was in the library at Landene, waiting restlessly for Lady Farnim to arrive. The sinking sun made a glow upon part of the old book-cases, and flooded the garden outside, and made golden light upon the grass beneath the trees of the park. Frank stood in the shadows, miserable, restless, turning over the leaves of a blotting-book between his fingers, as if, as he told himself inwardly, he were 'a schoolboy waiting to be flogged.'

Oh, what was he going to do, how should he be able to speak, in what manner could he possibly express the errand he had formed? The thought of her kindness seemed to rise in his throat and

choke him as he stood; the idea of saying such words to a lady was in itself too terrible for thought. Had he not been mistaken, would it not be better to turn and fly before the worst should come?

But then came other remembrances that served to detain him where he was, though they could not make his wretchedness less keen—he had already spoken against her; it was not possible now to free himself from that. And the remembrance of Lady Farnim's dark smiling face bent close to the childish features that morning was still within his mind—a haunting fear, as if it rested with him to protect the younger life that was so free from evil yet. Others might have said that the greatest danger remained still for him—but even if it were so, our sense of guardianship can be itself our guardian.

Once more, he felt himself in a perplexed position, in which the lives of others were twisted strangely with his own—and his own nature and his father's training combined to make him desire in perplexity to take the straightest course he could.

He stood still in the dim light leaning his hands upon a chair, as he heard footsteps coming nearer to the door. The carriage had already returned

when he arrived; he had known that he would not have long to wait. But as the handle turned at last he felt, for the first time in his life, a feeling of faintness that made his knees tremble and sent the blood backwards from his face.

In another instant that seemed to be relieved as the door opened, and Lady Farnim entered and advanced to him.

She was still in the black dress that drooped like a cloud of dark floating lace, and her black and gold hat hung carelessly from her hand. She had come in from driving; her dark hair was roughened, and her loveliness showed a little flushed fatigue that seemed to leave her in no great haste to speak. Yet he felt that, tired as she was, his presence was some relief to her. She smiled at him with dark wistful eyes and without putting out her hand, and sat down at once in an easy chair upon the rug, letting her hand rest carelessly upon its arm. Her lips looked tired and anxious; there was an expression on her face that he had never seen in it before. He stood before her, pale and quiet, he felt that with such an interview before them the first words had better come from her.

She raised her eyes to him after that minute's pause, and smiled. 'Well, why have you come to me again to-day?' she said.

Frank felt as if more were implied in that question than he entirely knew. He had already determined what to say, and he spoke the words at once.

'I have come to ask you for your husband's address, Lady Farnim,' he replied.

No doubt his voice had in it that distinctness which comes against our will, when an inward consciousness gives an added meaning to our words. He thought that a change passed over her face; but she kept her eyes on him. Her voice came very quietly, with a dryness and coldness in its tone.

'It is not in my power to give you my husband's address to-day,' she said.

'Can I have it soon?'

'I have told you already that Lord Farnim does not wish to be disturbed by business whilst he is away.' There was a little pause, whilst they still looked at each other. And then Frank spoke again, with greater quietness than before.

'Can you tell me when he will return?'

Minna had dropped her eyes, and only her dark

lashes could be seen drooping on her cheeks. Her voice came at last in a low biting whisper that gave a strange force and significance to the few words she said.

‘Is that really what you have to ask of me?’

Frank paused another moment again before he spoke. His heart was beating fast, and he could only speak low, but there was no use now in even attempting to retreat.

‘I only wanted to know if you know at what time he will return?’ he said. She raised her eyes as he spoke, and he saw the gleaming light in them as he saw the sudden glow of colour in her cheeks.

‘Someone has been telling things of me to you,’ she said. He stood with his head bent, without word or action of defence.

Lying back in the low chair, Lady Farnim passed one of her little hands across her eyes. She seemed to be reflecting deeply, seeking for some clue that should have power to guide her words. Then all at once she looked up hastily and spoke.

‘It is Amy Merse. She has been talking of me to you—the wretched fool,’ she cried.

‘No, she has not.’

‘She was crying this morning. It is you, then, who have been telling her of me!’

Frank was silent. In that instant he felt that the worst of all had come. Still, for a few moments she did not move or speak. She lay still with half-closed eyes, arranging and smoothing her black lace with her hand. He was scarcely able to feel in his agitation that she was waiting for calmness enough to give him the punishment that she desired. When she rose at length and stood up she appeared almost perfectly composed, though her face was of a dead brown paleness, and her nostrils quivered as she spoke. Her voice was rapid, but very low and exceedingly distinct and clear. He stood quite still and heard.

‘It seems that I have great reason to be obliged to you, Mr Mannian,’ she said. ‘You come to my house when my husband is away, you give me the trouble of attending to your affairs, and then when by those means you have secured some sort of footing in the place you take advantage of it to do all the mischief that you can. It is not enough for you to listen to all these false reports of me—of me who am so alone, unprotected,’ her voice became

almost broken here, 'you must spread them even in my house, you must come to me and insult me to my face. You may leave the house, Mr Mannian, and you need not give yourself the further trouble of entering within these doors again.'

She looked at him as if she expected some answer to her words. But he only bowed, took up his hat, and walked away—

Minna heard the closing door, as once before she had heard another door close upon her life. The remembrance seemed to overcome her, a longing came over her to call him back, she made a step forward and stood with her arms partly stretched out towards the door that had been closed. In vain! Was she always then to be alone, would no one then be able to believe in her? A feeling of utter dreariness came over her, she fell back into the chair in which she had sat and covered her face with her hands

After a while she rose and went to her own room, meeting her maid on the way, and giving orders that she should not be disturbed. Once alone she locked herself in and gave way to hysterical weeping. That did not last long, but it did not relieve her; she lay down upon her bed

and let the long hours of the evening pass onwards to the night. Now and then she moaned, but she lay quite still, with her face hidden always in her arms. And after a while as the hours passed onwards even her moaning ceased. The feeling of utter loneliness was become too strong for pain.

Dark thoughts swept over her as she lay with her face concealed in this manner, hidden even from the darkness of the night—thoughts of the dim park, and of the river, of stealing out into the stillness, and never being found or heard of more. What was the use of further attempts? she was left alone—she must live always in this suspicion and this isolation now. If she could have had any companionship—any—this young bright life to be her slave, this child to put a soft believing face to hers, if but these two only had been left, not to know her, or knowing her, to believe and care for her still—then there might yet have been some faintest hope in life. Alone, desolate, craving for companionship, seeing unjust suspicion in all the eyes that were near her—the endless darkness and dreariness seemed closing round her as she lay. She felt too desolate to move, there seemed no use in further hoping now,

When the morning came she had not slept, and her face looked drawn and sunken with fatigue; there was the sickness of physical exhaustion on her mind. And yet although there came no hope with the daylight, she had still something left in her that could be pleased with the feeling of the little luxuries it brought, the pillows that her maid heaped round her, the eider-down that rested softly upon her weary chillness, the little dainties that were so carefully prepared for her. The night had been so lonely, and these things meant some pretence of nearness, some touch and companionship at least. Yet she would not rise, she felt too ill and sick in mind to move, and lay still through all the morning hours upon her bed. Her letters were brought to her; there was one from her husband's lawyer that she had long desired, and that, beyond her expectation, contained a missive for which she had not dared to hope. It affected her strangely, and brought tears to her eyes, but she could not bear to look at it, and hid it away out of sight after she had crushed it in her hands. After all, it would make but little difference to her, it left the question of her life to be decided still.

That question seemed to press like a dull weight upon her mind as she came downstairs, at length. She had risen and dressed again without ringing for her maid, but she had felt no wish to make any change in her attire, the black lace drooped round her like funeral raiment still. She moved slowly as one oppressed with long illness, her head hung heavily, she felt as if she had no longer strength to move. If this was all that there was left, was it worth while to live?

She went slowly down the long stairs, fearing every moment that she would be seen. But the house was still, there were no footsteps even of servants to be heard. In the great hall the door of the library was open. She entered languidly, remembering that there, at least, Amy Merse was not likely to be found. It was empty, the afternoon sunlight was on the bookcases, the bright colours of the flowers were without. She went and leant against the open window, looking with dreary eyes upon the brightness of the park. If this was all that was left there was not much in life for her.

A footstep coming round the corner made her

start. It had been the step she knew—Frank Mannian stood outside amongst the flowers.

He stood quite still as he caught sight of her—still as if that sight had struck him motionless as he stood. Then, remembering, he took his hat from his head, and stood quiet there, a young erect figure, with his dark curls bare to the sunlight. They did not look at each other. Then she slowly raised her face, and their eyes met—hers full of sad, dreary inquiry, and his of a schoolboy penitence that scarcely dared to meet her glance, until, as the slow smile rose faintly into the sadness of her eyes, his own changed as if their darkness were being filled gradually with light. And then, with a sudden movement, he held out to her the flowers in his hand.

‘I have brought you some yellow roses, Lady Farnim,’ he said.

Minna did not entirely know what possessed her in that moment; it was one of her overcoming instants when she could struggle no longer with herself. With a passionate gesture she put up her little hands and grasped her throat; it seemed as if without that movement the strangling feeling would leave her without the power to breathe.

And then, as tears rushed from her eyes and she let her hands drop, she turned again to him.

‘Come—come into the library that I may speak to you,’ she said.

* * * * *

Frank had reason to remember that afternoon—those long, strange vibrating hours that were first able to pierce into his young carelessness the sense of the deep perplexities, and the hidden torturing anguish in the world. It was new to him to have to stand and wait, silent, pitying, longing to give some word of help, whilst a woman poured out her confidence on him, with rapid sentences, streaming tears, passionate gestures that made him dread every instant that she would fall down on her knees to implore him to believe her as she spoke. Oh, if she had helped her father in the old days—was that so wrong?—he had wished it—she was so young—she had never known all the harm the play would bring. Indeed, indeed, there was nothing true in all that was said of her, but she was so alone, unprotected—there was no more hope or friend for her. . . If he could

have fancied that she was acting, the conviction would have brought to him some comfort with its doubt, but he could not, her passion of sorrow had an intensity that could not but be real. It was the struggling anguish of one who is not accustomed to break down, and the distress of it was terrible to him. She had sunk from her seat, and was almost resting upon her knees at last, when, suddenly rousing herself, she stood up, and then went to the window. He waited where he was, miserable, longing to go away, and yet unable to leave her in the condition he had seen. She stood leaning against the window-frame again. Then, turning very quietly, she came down the room to him.

It seemed as if she had regained her old grace, and her self-possession too. She moved very silently, he could hear the rustle of her black dress as she came quietly down the room. When she was near to him she stood still, putting out her hands towards him but without touching him. The light from the window was behind her, but he could see that her face was a little altered and trembling with the tears that she had shed, and that her eyes, heavy still with those tears, were looking

with child-like pleading confidence at him. That dark entreating glance seemed to hold him—her voice came in low earnest tones that were as childish as her look.

‘I used to help my father; that is all. They say worse things of me than that—I wish you could believe me.’

‘I do believe you.’

His words came as words come at such instants, with an involuntary movement before he had time to consider for himself. But they seemed to give the relief that she desired. She clasped her hands on each other, and drew one little sigh between her lips. With an altered manner which yet was that of one who must complete what is begun, she whispered low again,

‘I am so alone—unprotected’——

She was silent. He stood waiting, knowing that the next words, if they came at all, must come again from her. And then she spoke.

‘My husband has left me.’

There was a long silence. Frank had made a little movement, he could not help it, but he was still now, with his eyes upon the ground. After that long while she went on speaking again, fast

and distinctly, but with long pauses between each broken part of a sentence that she said.

‘It was when we came here—after our honeymoon was done—we had been very unhappy—but I never thought—he would leave me.’

Again, and with more command over the more connected words, so that he dared to raise his eyes again to her.

‘He went away from me—but he was not like others, he did believe in me—I wrote to his lawyer once—he sent me this to-day.’

She held out the folded letter that he now saw she had kept within her fingers. She did not speak a word, but he knew what she meant and he took it from her hand. Her glance seemed to command him, and he opened it and read. Only not connectedly, for his excitement was almost too great for him to be entirely able to join or understand the words.

Mr Grimson had been informed by Lady Farnim that she was convinced that certain false rumours were being spread abroad of her, her present lonely condition serving to give a colour to reports. He was writing now to Lord Farnim to entreat him to give, as he best could do, some written testimony

that might be used with the force of a denial against these idle tales, feeling sure that Lady Farnim would never make use of such testimony except in case of utmost necessity, but that it might be of the greatest importance to her to have such evidence in her power. There was no need for his lordship to condescend to send any words of contradiction to these unfounded rumours; but if he would append his signature to the letter that was now sent to him that would be quite enough.

That was the letter; across the writing on its last page was scrawled in the bold and rapid characters that Frank had seen before,

‘Certainly. L. Farnim.’

The words had a fascination for the young man, who held them in his hand; he kept the letter sideways that he might follow them more carefully with his eyes, observing their scrawled carelessness and the manner in which the strokes went up and down. A sound near him roused him, he turned his head and saw that Lady Farnim had again come close to him. She was looking towards him with her dark entreating eyes; she seemed in doubt of the effect the words

might have on him. Rousing himself with an effort from his abstraction, he folded the letter again and placed it in her hand. She stood with her fingers clasped against her waist, a black still figure by his side.

‘Thank you,’ said Frank, ‘it is very good of you to show that thing to me,’ and then he laughed, and meeting her surprised and startled glance he laughed again. ‘I beg your pardon, but I could not help it. I was only thinking it seems very easy in these days for a husband to defend his wife.’

Minna looked at him, and then said a few words in a low voice.

‘I do not blame him.’

‘It is not necessary for him to come to her ;’ went on Frank, unheeding, and still entirely occupied with his own ideas, ‘it is not necessary for him to give himself the least trouble in doing or speaking or writing, or putting himself out in the very smallest way. One little signature, and the whole affair is done.’

Again Minna looked at him, and again spoke in a low and inward voice :

‘You do not understand me. I do not blame him.’

Frank was silent now, absorbed in new surprise. She went on hastily and passionately, as if her inward feelings would not allow her time to rest.

‘I do not, I cannot, I have not left myself the power for that. He deserted me without any fault of mine; he could scarcely get through the honeymoon with me—he grew tired of me so soon; he brought me to this home here only that he might insult me by leaving me as soon as we arrived; he leaves me now to bear all the insults and suspicion of the world. And yet there is one thing. . . . I cannot blame him. . . . I will tell you it all, and then you will know everything of me.’

There was a long silence, whilst they did not look at each other.

‘I asked him to marry me.’

He raised his head with a quick involuntary movement. Minna had not blushed, she had turned very pale; she went on speaking in a distressed and rapid voice, twisting and untwisting her slender brown fingers all the time she spoke.

‘I was very miserable, my father had gone, everyone had deserted me. And he had loved me. And I asked him, and he thought he was bound in honour, and then he hated me for that. And then he left me as soon as ever he had brought me to his home. You know it all.’

Suddenly letting her arms drop, and with an altered manner whose passion shone and lightened in her eyes:

‘Oh, men have no generosity, they have no hearts,’ she cried, ‘it is because they are stronger than women they think they can do anything they please with them. A woman is a fool who places herself in the power of any man; they have not generosity enough for that.’ She moved back a few steps, and standing before the easy chair in which she had sat, she put her hands before her eyes and cried.

After a while she uncovered her face, and came back and stood near him. Her manner was that of one who has some final words to say. She had folded her hands against her waist, her eyes looked at him with tearful entreating solemnity; her voice was very low, with something inexpressibly touching in the softness of its tone.

‘I am left alone ; I have no friend.’

‘I will try to help you.’

His words came as before of themselves, before he had time to consider what they meant. She cast down her eyes, and gave him no answer either by word or look. After a while she put out her hand, and he took it, held it for an instant, and then let go of it again. Perhaps for that instant whilst he kept it in his own, other thoughts may have risen in his mind, but every instinct of honour that was in him warned him that in that moment he must be self-restrained.

Alas! it should have been for her who was older than he was, and more experienced, to have taken care for him. But she thought only of securing his support in her loneliness ; she had no idea of that. Already this imagination of his friendship had become a rest for her. For him, in a deeper sense than had been the case that morning, his sense of guardianship had, for the time at least, become once more his guardian.

They did not talk much together after that, though Minna, leaning back now in a weary yet satisfied manner in the easy chair, had a few more words for him. She felt very ill, she would

go to her room and rest, and see no one more that day. And then she entreated him to tell Amy all she had told to him. Frank accepted that office without pleasure — perhaps she was not less pleased with him for that—and then they parted, but not before she had said one thing more to him that often dwelt in his memory in the after-times.

She had risen, had bent her head to him in sign of farewell, and he was turning away when arrested by some unexpected words of hers. They came in an involuntary manner, as if she had forgotten something that she remembered now.

‘There is one thing more. . . . I must tell you.’ . . . she said. ‘I feel sure of it although I do not understand. . . . When next Leap Year comes my husband will come back to me.’

Frank stood still, surprised, only daring to question with his eyes.

‘I know it, I feel it,’ she said, as if knowing that some explanation was required. He will have to be in England then—for a long while. And I have always felt it—he will return to me.’

All his life afterwards Frank remembered how

she looked at that instant, standing there in her black dress, with her face partly turned towards the window, and a dreaming, smiling light within her eyes. He scarcely knew why that should make him feel more sad. Without word or look of answer he left the room, and hastened to fulfil the command she had given him at once.

It seemed like a change indeed of scene and thought to find Amy alone reading in the midst of the drawing-room, a little solitary roseleaf figure there. He stood by her chair and spoke to her at once, as he had been told to do, whilst the flushing evening light grew dim outside—omitting only one piece of information that Lady Farnim had bestowed on him—he could not, for very shame, tell of the proposal she had made. On her husband he felt himself at liberty to pour out his indignation; he pleased himself with supposing that his companion must share these sensations as they came. The interview, however, was less satisfactory than he had imagined it would be; he found himself only able to rouse one feeling from her, and that the very last that he would have imagined his story could excite.

‘I must go home,’ said Amy.

Frank argued, expostulated, entreated, explained with much eloquence, the duty a woman owes to another of her sex, expatiated on Lady Farnim's wrongs, became angry at last, and fell into the offended silence that should have been more eloquent than words. But it seemed as if all this labour was in vain.

'It is not right—I am sure it cannot be right for me to stay,' repeated Amy, with the burning of the eyes that can take the place of tears. 'Aunt Marian would not like it, or my mother, and I must always try to do what pleases them. And she did use to play cards for money, and she is living away from her husband—oh, I cannot believe it would be right.' Frank found himself becoming angry, and thought it would be best to take his leave at once. After the excitement of the last two days, he felt in need of rest.

As he made his way through the darkening shadows of the park, he said inwardly a few words upon 'propriety,' and a few more upon 'narrowness' as well. Perhaps he did not sufficiently understand that his own reflections had lately undergone various changes, and that it was possible

that his companion of the railway journey must submit to struggles too.

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It was so indeed. Amy spent that evening alone within her room, sitting with her hands clasped, in a misery of indecision, such as she had never known or even imagined in her life.

She had thought it her duty to dress carefully in her new soft cream colour a few hours before, and even to fasten a spray of scented geranium leaves near her throat, and had gone down to the empty rooms to perform her social duties by herself. She had gone through the miserable form of the long dinner, sitting alone and trembling at the end of a table which was only laid for one, burnt with blushes, choked with every morsel of the endless courses, and yet without courage to tell the footmen that the solitary ceremony might cease. And when dinner was over she had sat alone in the midst of the great drawing-room, all lighted with wax candles as if a crowd were there, trying to work, trying to read, not daring to play, terrified at the silence, terrified still more to think that Lady Farnim might enter at any moment, and she

would have to speak to her. And then the long endless hour at length was past, and the clock struck nine, and she thought she might venture to go upstairs at last.

But what was the comfort of that when the solitude of her room brought such wretched doubts to her? She had been so fond of her room, and so proud of it, it seemed to her as if she would never like it now again so much. Hour after hour she sat in the great arm-chair at the foot of the bed on which she had thrown her dress, trembling, doubting, cold with wretchedness, holding her white dressing-gown fast with her hands, whilst her fair hair fell loose upon her shoulders. What was she to do? How could she even begin to perform that which she still felt must be right? Once as her eyes fell upon her little trunk she got up desperately in order to pack, but she sat down again without the strength for that. Once she got out her desk to write to her father, but she could not begin the words. Once, twice, she fell upon her knees, but there came more tears than prayers.

Oh! if she had not wished to stay so much, she felt as if she might have had more strength to go, she dared not give way to the selfish desires that

prompted her at all hazards to remain. She was sure of what her father and mother would think; the stories of which she had heard were terrible even to herself, she shrank from all thought of contact with the beautiful lady who had befriended her as one might shrink from the very touch of evil. And yet—Lady Farnim had been kind to her—and she was ill.

More and more as the night went slowly onwards and the candles slowly wasted, did that thought become dominant within her mind. She had come there to be a help—if Lady Farnim were ill—she ought to offer some help to her at least. That would not mean that she would stay with her, she ought to go to her—and then came back the old terror and repulsion, and she felt as if she could not bear to see or touch her now. And yet if she were ill—she had been kind to her—

Worn out at last she laid herself down upon the bed, but she could gain no comfort from the troubled sleep that came as soon as her tired eyes were closed; she only seemed to see Lady Farnim's dark and weary face, and to hear her parents' voices commanding her to return at once

to them. From that broken rest she started up at last. Oh, she could not bear it, she would go to Lady Farnim and find out if she were better, that would mean some work at least. She got up from the bed, and went through some of the passages with a candle in her hand, but her shyness and terror overcame her, and she returned hastily again. Then she sat down in the great arm-chair, too tired to think, too restless to sleep, that she might wear out the night in weary meditation there. The night was very still, and though she could not sleep there was some relief in that.

It was a little after two o'clock that she heard a gentle knock outside her door. She was so tired that she could scarcely even raise her head to see. The knock was repeated, then the door opened and Lady Farnim entered.

She was still in her black dress, though her hair hung loose and rough. Her eyes had a painful, opened look, they had weary lines round them, and her breathing came painfully between half-opened lips. Her dress was disordered, her hair had evidently escaped of its own accord from its fastenings, and her whole appearance had the look of one

who has forgotten order under some intense strain of suffering or of distress. The usual expression of her face had become absorbed into haggardness, and she put out her hands, as if she must almost grope her way. Amy had risen hastily from her arm-chair, she sank wearily into it at once, and sat leaning there, looking straight in front of her, not moving the hands upon her knees, as if in some trance of misery that left her no strength to move.

The candles burnt low before the glass, but there remained light enough for its reflection still. Amy stood leaning one hand upon the dressing table, her fair head bent a little towards her companion, her lips parted, and a look of intent watching resting quiet on her face. For those few minutes she did not dare to stir. Then she moved, in some vague hope that with the action some impulse too might come.

Moving very quietly and timidly, she went up to Lady Farnim and knelt down by her, and laid her hands upon the cold still hands, and then, feeling that her companion trembled, laid her cheek against them too, and kissed them. They were very cold, the hands on which her own were resting, and as she raised her frightened face,

she saw that the dark eyes above were looking down on her in a dumb imploring wretchedness. Amy had never known such a feeling as that which possessed her then — a yearning to help as a mother may have over a child who is ill. She rose quickly, and, drawing a chair to the side of the arm-chair, sat down in that, and, putting her arm gently round the neck that was near her, moved the drawn face close to hers, kissed it, laid her cheek against it, stroked it softly with her hands, drew it on to her shoulder, and, holding it there in close embrace, rested her cheek against its forehead, and was still. Only, when after a long while she pressed her lips softly against it once again, did Lady Farnim move, but, having moved, she roused herself, and stood up once more upon her feet. Then, turning towards Amy, she took her into one long straining embrace, went to the dressing table, took one of the candles and in another instant was gone.

And Amy, hearing the closing door, fell down once more upon her knees, doubting, trembling, self-discontented, feeling that she had made the decision that she dreaded more difficult still to be determined now. Alas! it is not always so

easy to decide in this perplexed and much entangled world, where a little contact can have so much effect upon our thoughts, where our pity cries out against our judgment for the sinners who are as human as ourselves

The August sunshine, ripening the corn day after day with its glory, left the great house in the park at Landene as gray and as lonely as before. But the young footsteps moved still about the place, the links between its imprisoned mistress and the companions of her captivity might have been strained, but they had not broken yet.

